

Sermons Preached by the Rev. Raymond Shaheen, D.D.

<u>Year, 1985</u>	<u>SERMON TITLE</u>	<u>TEXT</u>
January 6	"About The Wise Men"	Matthew 2:1-2
January 20	"An Old-fashioned Sermon"	
February 3	"Forgiven"	Matthew 18
February 10	"Heaven – Or – Hell"	Luke 16:22-23
February 17	"Where Will You Spend Eternity?"	Matthew 25
February 20	"Ash Wednesday Meditation	
<i>MISSING</i> February 24	"Deadly Sin: Envy"	
March 3	"Seven Deadly Sin: Lust"	
March 10	"Seven Deadly Sin" Anxiety"	Matthew 6
March 17	"Seven Deadly Sin: Pride"	Luke 18
March 24	"Seven Deadly Sins: Anger"	Ephesians 4:26
April 7	"Something Worth Remembering"	Mark 16:6-7
April 14	"The Best Kept Secret In The Church"	Ephesians 1:19-20
April 28	"Tough Love"	I John 3:1-2
<i>MISSING</i> May 26	"When Man Says Yes To God"	Matthew 27:22

"ABOUT THE WISE MEN"
(Matthew 2:1-2)

QUIET OUR MINDS and hush our hearts,
O God, and by the cleansing power
of the Holy Spirit make us fit to
think your thoughts, even now,
through Jesus Christ Thy Son, our
Lord, who when He came, came preach-
ing. Amen.

The text is from the Gospel for the day:

"Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the King, behold there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born king of the Jews, for we have seen his star in the east and have come to worship him."

Who were they? . . . were there three of them? . . . what were their names? . . .

Where did they come from? . . . how long did they journey? . . . were they
ever detoured? . . . did they ever experience doubt?

Any number of questions must come to your mind. Any number of these questions cannot be easily answered.

Oh, there's such a thing as legend that says they were Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar. Really now, Scripture doesn't tell us that there were three of them. We've come to that conclusion because we say that there were gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh - - and then we imply, of course, in our own thinking, that that meant each of the wise persons brought a gift, and if there were three gifts, then there were three bearers. Now that's only legend.

Was one of them black? Did one come from Africa? -- where did they originate, in Persia? -- how did the black man get to Persia? Don't waste your time trying to answer these questions. Any number of people try to speculate, and particularly as to what their profession, and vocation, was. We call them magi -- astrologers -- people who studied the stars.

Of all the things that I can't tell you about them, I've come to tell you what I can, and to tell you quite excitedly why I'm impressed about what I can tell you about them.

In the first place, they were people who were sensitive enough to see a sign of God. Now before anything else is said, we need to reckon with this: that God, who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is not a God who wants to remain hidden, is not a God who keeps himself detached from us. He is not a God who is withdrawn. He is a God who is always taking the initiative... He is a God who is always heading in our direc-

tion....He's a God who is always showing His hand!....He's a God who always wants His voice to be heard. Say it again and often: He's a God who is always giving us some sign.

I can't possibly study the Scripture -- the Scripture, you see, is a book about God -- without coming to any other conclusion than this! - -

-- He's always setting up some road-marker....

-- He's always setting up some sign....

-- He's always calling out to us, if not in a shout, then
in a discernible whisper....

This I believe.

Now about these wise men - - they were wise. They could see the sign, and they related it to God. Not that they could fully understand it, but somehow this thing, they honestly believed, was a signal from God. That's why we call them wise.

I'm willing to believe -- how you may feel I don't know -- but I'm perfectly willing to believe that that extraordinary sign must have been seen by many people. How do you hide a star? How do you hide an extraordinary star? Many people must have seen it. The Bible tells us only a few, we have reason to believe, only a handful kept following the star. I'm also about to suggest to you that having seen the star, having seen the sign, they must have gotten excited about it, as I am sure I would have. And I couldn't have kept my mouth shut - - I would have told other people -- "Do you see what I see!" - - and as they went from village to village it must have been a topic of their conversation. How can you think otherwise? But then come to the bottom line -- only a few saw the star and followed it. That needs to be emphasized as you read Scripture. They followed the star.

That leads me to tell you that they just didn't end up in Jerusalem or Bethlehem rather accidentally. There was a point in their life when they saw something above and beyond them irresistible, and they decided, they determined to be up and after it!

....which leads me to ask you the question: What is it that you've discovered in life so far that makes you want to be up and after it, some noble vision, some calling to the very depth of your soul, that gives you a tremendous measure of dissatisfaction until you are determined to follow what you've seen?

The second thing that needs to be said is this: I have reason to believe that, human as they were, they must have been detoured occasionally....I have reason to believe that the journey was long and arduous, and they must have had times when they wondered whether or not it was worth it.

In Chapel this week I read this same passage that Selmer read for us as the third Lesson for the day, the Gospel . . . and I couldn't help but be impressed with the fact that one of the translations has it that for a while, according to that translation, they were distracted. The translation goes on to say:

" . . . and when they saw the star again they rejoiced greatly. . "

...which leads me to say to you, my friends, I can understand how every now and then you can lose sight of a star.

In the first parish that I was privileged to serve, I remember how she came to me, a preacher's daughter, and what I didn't realize at the time was that she was entering a confessional booth as she said to me - - (because in essence that's what it was)

"Pastor, when I went off to college, for a while I forgot who I was, for a while I forgot the direction in which I was meant to head. Now I'm back, Pastor, and I can't begin to tell you how great the joy is!"

Be patient, my friend, you may have no idea how many people there are out there who started out nobly following a star that beckoned them on to something higher and better than they think they have ever known before....but for a while -- for whatever the reason -- they got sidetracked, they were detoured.

There's only one thing wrong with that, that once you get sidetracked, once you get detoured, you run the risk of never quite getting back on the right path. I've lived long enough to know, how well I know it, that for every single one of us the temptation remains to stay too long, to travel too far in the wrong direction. But there is always the possibility, you see, that the star could be seen again. How else can I read that passage of Scripture: "When they saw the star again, they rejoiced greatly."?

I know very well that I will die with so much unfinished business that I'd love to consider. I would like to live a bit longer, of course, and I'd like to go on serving as long as God gives me energy, somewhere -- I want to go on serving. And one of the things on my agenda would be to sit down with certain people who have reached a certain age level, that with whatever insight God might give me, I might allow myself to believe that maybe for the time being they're straying a bit -- and someone, by the grace of God, needs to refresh their memory of the direction in which they were once pointed, to remind them that it's still possible to find the path.

Human as they were, if there were three of them, surely there must have been at least one of them who kept their courage up. It's a trauma that I experience sometimes in my own personal life. I owe an eternal debt to a precious person who said, "You'll survive! Never forget who you are, the direction in which you are meant to go." That's

why we call them wise! They saw the sign -- it was over and above them and it beckoned them to something greater. Whenever they saw it, they rejoiced.

I can tell you this -- only the ones who kept to the path eventually arrived. Now that's a simple conclusion. You never find God unless you keep following in His direction. You never ultimately become aware of it unless you keep focusing on His signs.

Would you believe it, yesterday, as any day is a full day in my life, I sat with four different couples who wanted to talk about marriage. I look back and think of my conversation with each couple. I think I'd like to tell you how I began my conversation with each couple . . .

"You've come to see me to be married. I want you to know it in no uncertain way that I didn't go into the ministry just to marry people. I'm in the ministry because God has laid upon me the opportunity to introduce to people, whenever our paths cross, the God-factor -- the God-dimension. And may God have mercy upon my soul when I forget this!"

...so I give them fair warning, and I say,

"When you talk with me now, and you come to a person that you want to perform your marriage ceremony, you're talking to a person whose primary loyalty is to God, and I want you to know this. And when we talk about your marriage service, it's with that perspective in mind."

What else can I tell you about these wise men? Would you call a person wise who's left where he has been, who is classified as a very learned person, then get down on his knees in front of a baby, a helpless infant? Would you call that wisdom? Would you call it a wise thing to do to have in your hand a treasure, and then you place that treasure in front of a baby? That's exactly what those people did! They were wise, because at the end of their search they had discovered the most wonderful thing that a person can ever experience -- they had an encounter with God. At the end of their journey they couldn't help but think in terms of God!

How far are you along the path that you're traveling? I shan't press the point as to how brilliant the star is on the horizon, but I need to ask you the question: How far along are you upon the journey? . . . and are you staying to the path because you honestly believe it leads in the direction of God? I have to ask you that question.

Seated not very far from where I'm standing now is a person that I've known for more than a quarter-of-a-century. Within the past year or so he became a member of this

congregation, wanting to associate with people like you, and I say it without vanity, wanting to make me, his friend, his pastor. What do you suppose he said the very first time he came to a New Members Group?

...when I said, as is my custom, "I'm not here primarily to make Lutherans out of Methodists or Baptists or Presbyterians or whatever you may have been. I'm here because of my primary loyalty to Jesus Christ."

....no sooner was that session over than he gripped me by the shoulder and said, "Pastor, that's exactly why I'm here!" You see, he was following the star.

And isn't that a happy thought --- to think that that star that he was following should shine over this place! -- shine over people such as you! -- that this person, our brother in Christ, would be able to say, "This is it! -- I've arrived, there is nothing beyond this, I have it now!"

And that's something to think about. Happy indeed are you if you can be of that mind and spirit. And if you're not, keep following. The star is still there. This I believe.

* * *

(Transcribed as recorded)

"AN OLD-FASHIONED SERMON"

O GOD, We make so little time to do this sort of thing, to give some measure of undivided attention to the interpretation of your truth. That we should make the most of it now, enlighten us by your Holy Spirit. Through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who when He came, came preaching. Amen.

I don't know what value you place upon the titles that are given to sermons. I think maybe I spent too much time concerning myself with how this sermon could be entitled. I came up with three or four. Just in passing, I'll tell you what several of them were. But before I do that, you should know that the sermon is based upon the Gospel for the day, the third lesson that Christopher read for us, and read so well.

I came up with the title: "Of Pride and Prejudice"

...because in this passage of Scripture you happen to have a chap who came from one town that didn't think highly of another town. He was quite proud of his own, but he was prejudiced against the other town....

And then I thought I could call the sermon: "The Narrow Streets of Nazareth"

...because I want to concentrate a great deal upon the fact that Jesus Christ lived in Nazareth, and there were some people who didn't think very highly of this one-horse town....

But for want of a better title, for whatever it may be worth to you, I've concluded that I'd like to call it: "An Old-fashioned Sermon." Now you may ask me why.

Well, to begin with, it's as simple as I can possibly make it. When I was growing up, years ago, sermons were very simple. There was no attempt on the part of the preacher under whom I sat to smack of erudition, or to impress me that he was exceedingly theologically literate. All he really knew was the Scriptures, and whenever he stood up to speak, there was no question in my mind, he was expounding Scriptural truth. That's the way it was years ago, and that's the way it ought to be, that's the way it ought to be today.

And then as I thought of the sermon, in years gone by most sermons hit a target, a decided objective, and that was that hopefully, once the sermon had been preached, some-

one might be moved to give his life or her life to Jesus Christ.

When Winifred's brother, who is a Baptist minister, began his ministry in a suburb of Boston, the Senior Pastor of that congregation knew a measure of satisfaction that in the years that he preached there he never went to bed on a Sunday night without being able to say to his Lord, there was at least one brand new convert every Sunday. He preached with that thing in mind. By the end of the year they had at least 52 adults baptized in the Christian faith. His intention, of course, was to bear personal testimony to Jesus Christ, and as a result of his preaching someone might be moved by the Holy Spirit -- to use the language of a day that's come and gone -- to "come forward" -- give his life to the Lord.

I should also tell you that in the preaching of this sermon, in the preparation of the preaching of this sermon, I wanted to make it as simple as possible, because you might know a measure of excitement now when I tell you -- I hope that you will -- that I'm quite thrilled about certain things that we're doing in this year's Confirmation Class. We've introduced some brand new features. One of them is this: that periodically between now and Pentecost, every single small group....now we've divided the entire class into small groups every time they come together. They're taught Luther's Catechism in a setting where there's just one teacher, no more than eight pupils, and they spend the greater part of an hour together.

One of the requirements that I am exacting of them is that they must attend church as a small group every now and then. Now that happened this morning at 8:30. And then at 9:30 they went to the fireside room at Bethany, where there's a gracious setting with the fire on the hearth, with their small group teacher Alice Jean Lynch, as was the case today, and Jennie Lanning, who is providing me staff support these weeks and months.... the two of them would sit with that small group after they've been here for worship, and they'd talk about the sermon -- just what was said, what was the passage of Scripture? who were the people involved? -- what was the point the preacher was trying to make?

....and so if you find this sermon this morning a bit simplistic, it's because by deliberate attempt I didn't want any one of those 9th graders to walk away from here without having some measure of understanding of why the preacher spent his time to preach this sermon today.

Now let's get on with the passage of Scripture -- in an old-fashioned way. Let me put before you this passage of Scripture that cannot be ignored. It's a very exciting passage of Scripture because it deals with a kind of a chain reaction. First, you're introduced to Jesus. And then one person after another comes into the picture. Let's

take a moment or two to read it...part of the introductory section that comes to that passage that was read as the third lesson today:

"...again the next day after, John stood, and two of his disciples, and looking upon Jesus as they walked, he said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God!' - - "

Now you don't say that about everybody you meet, now keep that in mind. Somebody got excited about somebody worth getting excited about. And the person couldn't keep his mouth shut - - "Behold, the Lamb of God!" . . . and the two disciples heard him speak and they followed Jesus.

"...and then Jesus saw them turn and follow him, and said unto them, 'Whom do you seek?' And they said unto him, 'Rabbi' (which is saying Master) where do you dwell?' . . . "

Now get the picture -- they found somebody worth getting excited about - - the impression is so great that you'd like to find out where he is staying, you'd like to get a bit more from that person.

"... He said unto them, 'Come and see.' They came and they saw where he dwelt, and abode with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour . . . "

Get ready now -- chain reaction: one of the two which heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. Now what happens? He's so turned on by Jesus, he can't stand still - - he can't wait - - he makes a bee-line to find his brother Simon, and he said to him,

"... We found the Messiah, which is by interpretation, the Christ. And he brought him to Jesus. And when Jesus beheld him he said, Thou art Simon, the son of Jona; thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation, A stone. . . . "

Now: "... The day following, Jesus would go forth into Galilee, and he finds Philip, and he said to Philip, Follow me . . . "

...and what does Philip do -- twiddle his thumb? - - go about his day's work? No! He's turned on -- he's excited, and goes and finds a fellow by the name of Nathanael.

Do you have it? - - Jesus...John...Andrew...Simon Peter...Philip...Nathanael - - chain reaction, one person to another person. That's the way the Kingdom of God is advanced, not generally by something spectacular or sensational. That's the first point of the sermon, by the way: the Kingdom of God is advanced by ordinary people -- one person passing it on to another - - ordinary people.

My friend and brother in the Faith, Henry Snyder, who was our Theologian-In-Residence several years ago -- he and I used to have a running kind of an argument -- maybe you've forgotten, but I haven't. Henry used to maintain that the disciples were a cut above the average person, and I've always subscribed to the notion that they were plain ordinary persons, doing plain ordinary work. Now Henry isn't here to defend his position, so please, take my point of view, will you, for the rest of this sermon -- plain, ordinary persons, that's what they were, in plain, ordinary situations. It's very important that we remember that.

Now, Nathanael was such a plain, ordinary person that he reacted in a plain, ordinary way, because as soon as he heard that Jesus was associated with Nazareth, in a plain, ordinary way he said, "What good can come out of Nazareth?" -- that's the way an ordinary person would talk. Nathanael came from Cana, another town, where the people in Cana didn't think too highly of this other village. You know the small-town rivalry -- of course you do -- that's the way plain, ordinary people behave! Let's get the picture, these disciples, all twelve of them, didn't drop down from heaven fully fashioned. They were plain, ordinary people whom Jesus Christ saw fit to use. And they passed the word on from one person to another. That's the way the Kingdom spreads. They had so found Jesus Christ and so turned on by Him, that they couldn't keep it to themselves, they were constrained to pass it on -- plain, ordinary people.

Now, it has to be recognized, of course, that you can't pass on in an excited way unless you become excited. You really can't convince someone unless you yourself have had a measure of being convinced. Each of all these in turn couldn't wait to tell somebody else.

I'm going to stop now, quite incidentally, to share something with you. In the years that I have been privileged to be your pastor, I've also been charged for the most part in administration and personnel. As some of you know, my policy has always been never to ask you to do something that I don't do myself, if I felt it ought to be done, or if I were in your position and had the capability, I would think that it should be done.

Then also, I've always tried to put myself in the position of the other staff person. One day I went down to the kitchen, deliberately, when Mae Troxler was in charge of our food department...and I just hung around for a while, and I had my eyes opened as to just how all the details need attention in that person's particular position -- which the average person doesn't fully understand. And I've done the same thing with Phyllis, of course.

Now, every now and then on a Sunday morning, I say to myself, now if I were Walter Edmonds at the console, what might be my frustrations, what might be my concerns? Well, fortunately it doesn't happen in Saint Luke Church, but I must tell you about an organist who had frustrations where he played. As is true for Walter, he prepared his preludes deliberately. They were to be offered to the glory of God; and that's why he included a prelude in the service, to get people in tune with what was yet to come. And in that instance, in that congregation with that organist, he was annoyed when he couldn't help but notice that all the time he was playing the prelude, there were people busy talking back and forth with one another. That wasn't the purpose of the prelude, to provide background for their conversation.

...so being every inch the kind of person I believe Walter is -- he did Walter Edmonds' kind of thinking -- one Sunday he stopped abruptly the prelude -- dead silence -- only to have one woman's voice heard above all the others: "But I found out about a magic shortening called Crisco!"

...she couldn't wait until the church service was over to tell her friends about how wonderful this shortening is. She evidently found it more exciting even than the Good News that she might hear from the sermon....

You turned on by something? You can't keep your mouth shut -- you pass it on. This is an old-fashioned sermon, reminding us, in old-fashioned days people would think in old-fashioned ways. They passed it on -- ordinary people....in a very ordinary way, give Jesus Christ a chance to speak through them.

There was a day in the 19th century when practically everybody went to church, in England, particularly if they lived in a village. Huxley, the agnostic, was a guest in a country home. When it came time on Sunday to go to church, you were fully aware of the fact where you stayed -- and he had no intention to go to church. And as people were about to go to church, lo and behold! -- Huxley came forward with a very strange request. He nabbed one fellow, and said, "I have a suggestion for you. Instead of going off to church this morning, why don't you stay home, and the two of us will talk, and the two of us will talk....and you tell me about your Christian faith."

And the man to whom Huxley put this proposition, knowing how erudite he was, how smart he was, how articulate he was, simply responded by saying, "No, I'm not going to do that! You want me to tell you about Jesus Christ? Whatever argument I'd bring, you'd outwit me, you can tear my defenses apart." Huxley, bless his soul, said, "I don't want you to argue with me. I simply want you to tell me quietly and earnestly what Jesus Christ means to you." The fellow stayed. And Huxley-the-agnostic and the

devout Christian sat face-to-face. How long they talked I don't know. But it's a matter of record, as I understand it, that when it was over, Huxley was deeply moved, and with emotion he said, "I can see that he's very real to you - I can see him in you." . . . in a very ordinary way.

You don't win people to Jesus Christ by argument. In recent weeks I've sat down with any number of people and tried to present a case, and found it an exercise in futility. Eventually, what is genuine, what is true will surface, and it will speak for itself, and that's all a Christian has to do! You don't argue people into the Kingdom, I'm convinced of that. Oh, Scripture says we ought to be able to give a reasonable answer to what we believe -- no question about that! But in the final analysis, what they discover down deep inside of us as the Spirit of Christ which is the argument above all arguments.

The point that I'm trying to make is that Christianity goes forward one person to another, and usually from one very ordinary person to another very ordinary person, in a very ordinary way.

I read once about a girl in an Italian village who was waiting at the train station for the train to arrive, because she was told that on the train would be her archbishop. Italians had a great deal of respect, at least in that day, for the members of the cloth, the hierarchy of the Church, and she expected that when the train would arrive, that the archbishop would have come with some pomp and circumstance, and an entourage....only to be disappointed, that the only person who resembled somebody from the church was a simple-looking priest, in a simple cassock, carrying a simple suitcase.

And as they walked away from the station he caught up with her and walked alongside of her, and he offered to give her some assistance, whatever it was. He was very kind to her. She records for herself the impression that this man made on her in the spirit of Jesus Christ...disappointed as she was that she had not seen her archbishop. But that man happened to have been her archbishop! -- not by preaching in the cathedral...not by having her kneel and kiss the symbol of his office....not by any formal pronouncement. Simply as they walked along the way, in a very quiet, gentle manner, he communicated Jesus Christ -- person-to-person, in a very ordinary way....and usually by people who live in a very ordinary place.

And that was the hang-up for Nathanael. He couldn't believe that Jesus Christ could come out of Nazareth. You understand, don't you, that Nazareth was a very plain, one-horse town -- never referred to in Scripture before -- no mention of Nazareth in the Old

Testament. There was no prophet who came out of Nazareth. There was nothing historical or of religious significance attached to Nazareth. So all that Nathanael could say -- "You're excited about this person, and you tell me he comes from Nazareth!" Even when Jesus came back to His home town, they didn't get excited. After all, he had worked for them -- they had employed him...that's where he grew up as a child. He played in the streets with all the youngsters of Nazareth. He was just like anybody else! But out of Nazareth came Jesus Christ....

... and it was in Nazareth, this one-horse town, that His mother taught Him about God, taught Him the Bible, prepared

Him to light a lamp of truth, to walk the way of love...

...and people will follow to the end of time, even to the very gate of Heaven.

Now talking about plain, ordinary people and plain, ordinary ways, in plain ordinary places, I must tell you about my mother again. But before I do that, I must tell you that when I look at each one of you I have triple vision. Now you'll have to let me explain that. I see you first of all as a person who knows Jesus Christ. I also see in my image of you the person who introduced you to Jesus Christ. And I would like to think that I could also see a third person in the picture -- the person who is going to know about Jesus Christ because of you. Whenever you see a Christian you get a triple image: -- my mother -- a very ordinary person. I don't know that she went to

the 6th grade, got that far. When she died I stood by the side of the grave, and I said to the pastor who conducted the service, "Would you let me say the last words?"

I prayed for enough emotional strength to be equal to it, it's what we call in ecclesiastical language, the language of the Church, the Commitment. And I committed my mother's body to the ground, and I committed her soul to God. And as I walked away from that grave it occurred to me, as it had never occurred before, that she was the one person, moreso than any other person, who had first talked to me about Jesus Christ.

My predecessor in the first church that I served was a marvelous man of God. Not the best preacher in the world, one of the poorest administrators I've ever known, but a heart as big as the heart that Jesus Christ could place in any person. One day he and I were walking down Market Street, not far from the church that Sister Mildred began in her service for the Lord. And on the opposite side of the street there was this simple person -- illiterate, yes she was -- but she deliberately crossed the street, came over to where Dr. Banyon and I were, and she blurted out to him one of the most wonderful things that I've ever heard said to a pastor, or to any person who knows Jesus Christ -- she said, "Dr. Banyon, when I die and get to Heaven, you're the first

person that I'm going to look for, and when I see you I'm going to take you by the hand and I'm going to tell all the other people up there that you're the person who showed me the way to Heaven.

As I walk away from this sacred desk now, I ask you this question: is there anything that matters more than that? And it happens by ordinary persons, in ordinary ways, in ordinary places. This I do believe.

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(Transcribed as recorded)

"FORGIVEN"
(Matthew 18)

GRACE, Mercy and peace from God
our Father and from His Son
Jesus Christ, our Blessed Lord.
Amen.

First, if you will, a personal word.

As I stand at the sacred desk on this particular morning, I am fully aware of the fact that it was on this first Sunday in February, 1956, when I was installed as the Pastor of this congregation. The Rev. Dr. J. Frank Fife, now of blessed memory, and then the President of the Maryland Synod, along with Dr. Dwight Putnam, President of the Central Pennsylvania Synod, from which I had come, were here to stand with me when you opened your arms to receive me as the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls. These twenty-nine years have passed very quickly, and as this thirtieth year is about to begin, for whatever time God may still give us together, let there be no question in your mind as to the gratitude that the entire Shaheen family feels when we think about you.

When I was pastor in Pennsylvania, I felt very strongly, the entire time that I was associated with that parish, that there was no other place in the world where I would rather be -- that as long as God wanted me to be there, that's where I would stay. Then God brought me to you. And I can honestly say that every single day that I've spent with you, I have always said to myself, there's no other place where I'd rather be as long as that's God's plan for our life together.

When we came to you, David enrolled in Eastern Junior High, and Jon was at Highland View. Those years have passed so quickly. You made us part of your family, and our family wants to thank you in this way -- now.

When I stand here today I am gripped by a fundamental concept of our Christian faith. It's been haunting me for a number of weeks, and I'm constrained to share with you from the depth of my soul what you're about to hear. It's inspired by the 18th chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew. It was quite an encounter that Jesus had with some of His disciples, and Peter, as you know, always numbered among those who poses an interesting question and then in a self-congratulatory manner begins to answer. He said to Jesus something like this: "If my brother offends me, how often should I forgive him? -- seven times?" . . . pleased as punch, you see, that he had come up with what he thought was a very admirable answer, and surely a very generous one. But Jesus had a way of cutting people down to size, just because He loved them and could never

compromise His regard for truth. So He said, "Peter -- seven times seven? No, Peter. -- Seventy times seven . . . " And surely that must have shaken him up a bit! -- as I dare say it shakes you up a bit when you contemplate this whole business of forgiveness.

For when you say seventy times seven there is no end to it -- you go on forgiving, and forgiving. And that's what you and I really believe in our relationship with God -- because -- let me give you a very free translation of your being here this morning. We are all the same bunch of sinners who were here the last time. And no sooner are we found together than we begin at the same point as we began when we were here before:

"We poor sinners confess unto Thee that we are by
nature sinful and unclean . . . "

In the old Anglican Church they outdid us. They not only referred to themselves as sinners, but referred to themselves as 'poor miserable sinners' -- evidently we have a higher regard for ourselves than the Anglicans, and we're not going to go that far! But sinners -- that's what I am, and that's what you are.

And you can't possibly think of sin without thinking of forgiveness. But I don't know of anything in our whole Christian experience regarding which there is more sloppy thinking done than there is in this whole matter of forgiveness....

- - some people erroneously allow themselves to believe that when you forgive someone, you pretend that what happened never took place....
- - some people permit themselves to think that when they ask for forgiveness, they may wish very much that you'll condone, or at least not condemn what has happened....

Whenever you think of forgiveness, you must think of it primarily in terms of a restored relationship. You don't dwell on an incident, whatever its level. You concentrate on a relationship that's being restored. That's a marvelous thought. Whatever forgiveness is, it is reconciliation. Say it again and often -- it's the restoration of a relationship.

I suggest that you make it required reading for yourself before the day ends that entire chapter according to Matthew. Read it very carefully and get all the insights that ought to register with your mind. It talks about forgiveness that's complete...it also talks about forgiveness that's conditioned. Now are they compatible? How can forgiveness be complete, and at the same time you can say it has its conditions? Well that ought not to shock you overmuch, because every time we pray the prayer that our Lord taught us, as we forgive, we're in duty bound to come to grips with the condition on which that forgiveness is meant to continue.

Now I'm going to stop at this point, and I'm going to ask you a question -- a question the like of which I dare say you've never thought of asking. The question:

When you die and go to Heaven, who are the people you'd like to meet there, aside from your Blessed Lord and your loved ones?

I've answered this question for myself a long time ago. When the time comes, I want very much to see my Lord, as the Gospel hymn puts it, and as Scripture suggests it -- face-to-face.....and I long to see my loved ones who have preceded me there. I don't know how you might answer this question for yourself when you think of Heaven -- who are the people you want very much to meet there aside from our Blessed Lord and your loved ones? I'd like to tell you how I've already answered it for myself, if you're at all interested. I hope you are, because the balance of this sermon depends upon that answer. Should you have the slightest concern as to how I might answer, let me tell you.

For me, the person would be someone, oddly enough, that I had never met. I'll be meeting her for the first time -- him or her, I should say. I can't tell you really whether the person is a man or woman, a son or a daughter, a brother or sister, a husband or wife. All I can tell you is that this person is buried, according to the information I've learned, underneath a grave marker in a cemetery in or near New York City. My particular interest in that person stems primarily from the epitaph, a single word that set that person apart significantly. The one word -- only one word, carved into that head-stone is FORGIVEN. Mark you, there's no date -- no name -- nothing except that one word: FORGIVEN.

Oh, I know you, that mind of yours is beginning to function already, it raises all kinds of questions, doesn't it, pertinent or otherwise:

-- what was the sin or sins? -- and against whom did the person do the sinning?

For shame upon you if that's where you're going to level off! For shame upon you if you're going to concentrate at that point as to what the sin was, and with whom the sinning was shared! For shame upon you! Far more importantly than anything else, I dare make bold to say to you, is by whom the person was forgiven -- whence -- whence the forgiveness? That's the important thing.

Let's spend the rest of our limited time together by suggesting a three-fold answer to this question: By whom the forgiveness? ...who did the forgiving? Perhaps the person had made much of the fact that he or she had eventually come to terms with himself or herself. Now, please, for God's sake, don't discredit such possibility as

of little consequence. There are some people who go through life emotionally crippled just because they have never learned to deal charitably with themselves. There are some people who are unmercifully hard on themselves. For whatever reason, they have a very low self-image, and they have never learned to accept themselves as they happen to be, and to begin at that point.

One of the most important single lessons that I've learned recently, and by the grace of God I hope I will not forget -- one is, that life is never to be lived completely on our terms. And secondly -- basically and essentially, we may have to learn to come to terms with life! There are people who have never quite accepted themselves for the person they happen to be. Let me say it again, they can be unmercifully hard on themselves....and the net result is constant misery -- not only for themselves but for the people with whom they happen to live. They have never been able to forgive themselves.

One of the finest compliments I ever heard paid a member of the staff of Saint Luke was paid 3,000 miles or more away from here, when Winifred and Ethel Anderson, Robert Clawson, now of blessed memory, the two of them -- the four of us were doing that delightful month in the English country-side. And as we were driving along our thoughts came to Saint Luke, we could never forget Saint Luke....and Lillian McPherson's name came up in the conversation, and Ethel -- God bless her, as she would be wont to do, said that whenever she thought of Lillian McPherson she thought of somebody who was very comfortable with herself. That's one reason why Lillian could be as effective as she is -- forgiven. Could it be that that word, that single-word epitaph, is there because that person had mastered the fine art of forgiving oneself?

Secondly in this three-fold answer: by whom the forgiveness? Perhaps the person was overjoyed by the fact that someone he or she had wronged had come to terms, with him or her -- removed all the barriers of wrong-doing of whatever nature had set up: the bitterness caused by alienation had been replaced by the happiness of reconciliationfoes had become friends all over again. Now on this score don't discredit such possibility as of little value. You see, the fact cannot be ignored that at some time or another every single one of us has wronged somebody else; or at some time or another every single one of us has been wronged by somebody else. "There is none righteous; we have all sinned and come short of the glory of God."

Yet I must tell you with all the strength my soul can muster, God made us to live together in peace and harmony, and we will always be less than we are meant to be as long as estrangement remains. You refuse to shake my hand, you refuse to believe me,

you refuse to trust me -- and I'll be less than what I was meant to be. And when I treat you in the same way, estrangement will remain. Small wonder, then, that we should make so much of that one-word epitaph, since it implies that Heaven came down to earth and redeemed the situation. Forgiveness set in.

Any number among us have had no peace as we recalled a feckless or reckless thing in our past. We are troubled deeply when we think of some weak moment when we committed some act of indiscretion, or secretly, if only for a little while, enjoyed so much the injury we inflicted on somebody else, or had planned to inflict. Days and nights followed each other into weeks and months, even years, as, guilt-stricken, we longed to have our remorse recognized as we endured the anxiety we had to face on the part of the person we hurt . . . as we waited and waited -- (I've phrased this for you very carefully) -- as we waited and waited for the two-way traffic that the bridge called forgiveness was meant to carry. The bridge called forgiveness was built deliberately for two-way traffic! -- the one flow was the contrite and the remorseful person; the other flow was the initiative that comes with the outstretched hand. You can't have one-way traffic and have a bridge called forgiveness. Any number among us have had little peace, then, as we remember this.

Now, by whom the forgiveness?, in the third place? You have been waiting for this. Surely we cannot think of forgiveness apart from God! His forgiveness is ultimate, and the most essential, since all of us have sinned and all of our sinning is against God. When I sin against you, I sin against God, because the image of God is in you. You're God's child. Come now, who departing this world and awaiting the Judgment would want to be ushered toward the eternal gate unless he or she could be thought of as the forgiven one? The epitaph tells it all: born a sinner; lived as a sinner; but by the grace of God, died as a forgiven person. There is no other way, either through this world or into Heaven itself. Thanks be to God, who takes the initiative in this whole matter of forgiveness, as Scripture reminds us so superbly:

"While we were yet sinners, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself."

Because of God that one-word epitaph indicates peace and pardon and could be carved on that simple grave-marker.

When I die, and by the grace of God get to Heaven, I'm going to look for that person who is buried underneath that grave-marker with the one word: FORGIVEN. And how will I be sure that I've found the right person? I think I know: there will be lines of peace upon that person's face.

* * *

The peace of God that passeth all understanding keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

(transcribed as recorded)

"HEAVEN - OR - HELL"
(Luke 16:22,23)

GRACE, Mercy and peace from
God our Father and from His
Son, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

If it's a title that you'll be wanting for this morning's sermon, lock this one in rather firmly in your mind as the sermon continues, for I'm suggesting that its title be: "HEAVEN - OR - HELL."

Now I should tell you right away, it's not the sermon that I had planned weeks ago to preach this morning. Every now and then, not too often, however, when I stand before you, I do not preach the sermon that I had scheduled months, or even a year earlier. Sometimes in the course of the week there's a circumstance or event that justifies in my thinking the change in the schedule.

Now having told you that, let me tell you -- on Thursday morning of this past week, Winifred and I headed for the hills-of-home because the Angel of Death had hovered over our family. My brother's wife had died, and naturally I would want to be there with him and with other members of the family.

We drove the almost 200 miles to Muncie, Pennsylvania, believing the service to be at 1:00 o'clock in the afternoon. We arrived at 12:30, only to discover the service was scheduled for 2:00....and while we waited -- it's an experience perhaps few of you have ever had, maybe some of you . . . to be by yourself, in a funeral home, with the body of someone who loved you and whom you came to know and love -- lying lifeless. It gives pause for deep thoughts.

And then as I sat there and observed how people came, and recognized the relationship and the identification that I had with each of those who came -- then it occurred to me that most of the time when I go to funerals, I am conducting them. Only about five or six or seven times in my life have I sat through the funeral of a loved one or someone that I knew quite well, and I was there in the position of a -- to use an old expression -- a "mourner." So I gave full attention when 2:00 o'clock came and a young minister of the Gospel, having about seven years behind him, stood up and began the service.

I was immediately impressed with the fact that whatever conversation there had

been -- and sometimes you know that happens in a funeral home, by visiting that goes back and forth in a very relaxed way, all too relaxed, it seemed to me, in some places . . . but as soon as that minister began to speak, a holy hush descended upon that place and people became sobered and gave earnest heed to what was being said.

It prompted me to continue to think in terms of the fact that death is inevitable -- sooner or later the Angel of Death will hover over your home, your family circle. Eventually each of us finishes an earthly pilgrimage. What's it going to be like after we die? Good question, really. Some of us ask it. And some of us need answers that we can trust and respect. It ought never be simply a matter of speculation. And those of us who belong to this tradition, we always turn to the Scriptures, for the Bible gives us the answers. And this morning, as I talk to you about Heaven or Hell, there's this one passage of Scripture, the 22nd and 23rd verses of the 16th chapter of Luke, that constitutes the spring-board as we launch together into this conversation:

" . . . And it came to pass that the beggar died, and was carried into Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried, and in hell he lifted up his eyes . . . "

I'm not being fair with you if I stop at that point because not all of you are fully familiar with this passage of Scripture. I think I'd like to read it all for you. Now remember the title for the sermon: "HEAVEN - OR - HELL."

"There was once a rich man who dressed in the most expensive clothes and lived in great luxury every day. There was also a poor man, named Lazarus, full of sores, who used to be brought to the rich man's door, hoping to fill himself with the bits of food that fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side, at the feast in heaven; the rich man died and was buried. He was in great pain in Hades; and he looked up and saw Abraham, far away, with Lazarus at his side. So he called out, 'Father Abraham! Take pity on me, and send Lazarus to dip his finger in some water and cool off my tongue, for I am in great pain in this fire!' But Abraham said: 'Remember, my son, that in your lifetime you were given all the good things, while Lazarus got all the bad things; but now he is enjoying it here, while you are in pain. Besides all that, there is a deep pit lying between us, so that those who want to cross over from here to you cannot do it, nor can anyone cross over to us from where you are.' The rich man said, 'Well, father, I beg you, send Lazarus to my father's house, where I have five brothers; let him go and warn them so that they, at least, will not come to this place of pain.' Abraham said, 'Your brothers have Moses and the prophets to warn them; let your brothers listen to what they say.' The rich man answered, 'That is not enough, father Abraham! But if someone were to rise from death and go to them, then they would change their ways.' But Abraham said, 'If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone were to rise from death.'"

(from GOOD NEWS - in Today's English Version)

It's been said that when Christianity first came to the British Isles, the Messenger of the Good News was received by the King of the Northumbrians, who entertained him in fine fashion - - had his fire in the great hall, spread the festive board. Then when it was all over, he invited this bearer of Good News to address the royal court, and he said, "Tell me, what does your new religion, this Christianity, think, what does it have to say about life after death?" Now, presumably all of us are somewhat curious about life after death. What happens when we die? Where do we go? What's it like?

Some of us turn reverently to God's Word for answers to such questions. In the 16th chapter of the Gospel of Luke, which I've just read for you, Jesus told a story that gives a pretty clear-cut picture of how He saw it. Now let me encourage you to read those dozen verses again sometime today -- that 16th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke.

Now hear me and hear me well - - after I've wrestled with that passage of Scripture I've come to this conclusion: it is a well-drawn account of two different people who end up in one of two different places, because of the two different ways they lived before they died. In our earnest desire to know something about life after death, here's what I can tell you now on the basis of what Jesus said when He was instructing His disciples. You may not like everything that I'm going to tell you -- that's not going to bother me one bit -- because if you have a quarrel at this point, you can have that quarrel with my Lord and my Master, and not with me. What I am about to tell you is drawn specifically from what Jesus said when He instructed His disciples on this very subject....

First, as I read those dozen verses, I come to the conclusion that Jesus made it perfectly plain that He believed in life after death -- there can be no question about that. Some people, you know, don't. They believe that when you're dead you're dead, and that is it. Jesus Christ, as I read this passage of Scripture, believed in life after death.

Point #2: When Jesus thought in terms of life after death, He believed in Heaven. He also believed in Hell. There can be no question about that. For Him there was a line drawn, and on one side of that line there's Heaven, on the other side of that line there is Hell.

Third - Jesus believed that a person is to be found after death in either the one place, or the other. There can be no question about that! Lazarus -- he's in Heaven. Dives -- he's in Hell.

Point #4: Jesus believed, as He put it plainly in this story, that once a person dies and is found in either Heaven or Hell, that that's it! There can be no question about that.

...now there are those who maintain that even people, according to the Christian tradition, who think that after we die, God in His mercy will give us a second chance....

Now let me be as fair and frank as I can be with you: you may wish to cling to that if you want to, but on the basis of the passage of Scripture that I've read, I can't give you any measure of encouragement of a delayed final action on the part of God who is saying, "Well now you are dead -- give me a little more time to assess the situation, and maybe I'll change your condition -- I'll switch you back to one place or the other"that's a luxury you can't afford to think as you read this particular passage of Scripture. According to this story that Jesus told, there was no such thing as a second chance, after death.

Point #5: (you're aware of the fact that you're getting a bargain this morning?
-- usually sermons only have three points)....

Point #5: Jesus believed that what happens after death is determined very largely on what took place before we died. According to this particular passage of Scripture, there can be no question about this. Realistically speaking, where we end up after we die depends so much upon the direction in which we'll head while we are alive! Presumably that's why Jesus gave a rather detailed account of the kind of person each of these two people were before they died.

Now, I have to stop to make one thing as plain as I possibly can. In the story that Jesus told He mentions one of them as being very, very poor; He mentions the other as being very, very rich. Now let me disabuse you immediately of any notion that only poor people go to Heaven, and only rich people go to Hell. That's not the point of the parable. People who go to Heaven are people who go there because of their relationship to Jesus Christ, who believe in Jesus Christ, who put their personal trust in Him as Lord and Savior, and then while on this earth they try to live out the days of their years in a way that brings honor and glory to Jesus Christ. The people who end up in Heaven are people who try to live Heaven-like while they're here.

The people who go to Hell are not people who go to Hell just because they're rich. Being rich can be a person's opportunity by which to give a marvelous expression of living the kind of life that Jesus once lived here on earth. Being rich can be a person's marvelous opportunity.....

-- Andrew Carnegie, who made a handsome sum in the steel industry, is the person who said, "It's a shame"--"It's a shame," he said, "for a person to

die rich." . . . and he began giving away his money.

-- Sister Mildred, our Parish Deaconess -- every single one of us who have come to love her and to respect her would want her and every other deaconess to live in a fairly idyllic state in their time of retirement. They ought to have the benefit of so much, and they live in a bit of Eden, in Gladwynne, outside of Philadelphia -- because of the Pugh family, who made their money in hotels, and who thought in terms of putting their money to good work and make it possible for the deaconesses to have a community center in a bit of Eden....

-- Some of us -- or some of you, I should say, have drawn benefit from foundations, and the Rockefeller Foundation, specifically....

Being rich is a opportunity to do good that other people might not be able to do. Just because you're poor doesn't mean that you're Heavenly-minded. A person can be poor, impoverished, and become very cynical. No matter how much you may talk about the 'haves' and 'have-nots' -- there's always the risk of the 'have-nots' living in hate, and in envy, and in jealousy, by the very condition in which they find themselves. And that doesn't speak for spiritual health.

Point #6: According to the story that Jesus told, He believes that in either Heaven or Hell -- each in his or her own place becomes fully aware of where that happens to be. If you're in Heaven, it's heavenly. If you're in Hell, it's pure hell, and bluntly put, that could be the hell of it! One of the two of whom Jesus spoke is blissfully aware of his situation; the other is fully conscious of his despicable plight.

What, now, can be our conclusion? Dare we admit, as some wit has maintained, that "Hell is the truth found out too late"? -- maybe so. But it doesn't have to be that way! Read again that story that Jesus told and discover anew that Jesus insisted that in this world we already have enough guidelines....

-- that's why some of us belong to the Church -- because in and through the Church we find our way to Heaven. Architecturally speaking, that is why this church is designed the way it is, in reference to the part of a ship -- because it's the ship, according to the ancients, that would transport the believers across the ocean of life to Heaven's gate....

-- God gives us the guidelines through the Scriptures. It's the Book of Life! It's the handbook about God, as to how we're meant to live in God's world....

-- God gives us Jesus Christ, a guideline -- by example -- who said in no uncertain way, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes unto

the Father but by me . . "

. . . that poor chap in Hell, he says, "Please --- please, get the word to my family -- save them from the Hell in which I find myself" ...and Jesus in the story has to say, "They already have the Word. And if they're not listening to what they already have been told, even if somebody came from Hell they wouldn't believe them."

As I walk away from this sacred desk this morning I have to tell you -- no one has to end up in Hell. God in the very beginning intended us for Heaven. And that's where He's waiting for us. God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the God with the outstretched arms . . . and where He's to be found, at only one of those two great gates - - He's to be found waiting at the gate called Heaven. And that's a happy thought.

* * *

May the peace of God that passeth all understanding
keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.
Amen.

(transcribed as recorded)

"WHERE WILL YOU SPEND ETERNITY?"
(Matthew 25)

GRACE, Mercy and peace from God
our Father and from His Son
Jesus Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

This is the season of the year when ordinarily we've had a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Whenever I have had the good fortune to walk where Jesus walked, I found my soul quietly hushed, no matter in what direction I might look. But as you might know, because we're all human there are certain places that have an association the like of which might not be true for other areas.

There are three churches in the Holy Land that constitute my favorite of all that you find in that place where holy spots usually have a church erected upon them. One is the Church of the Pater Noster -- that's the Church of Our Father, built upon the site where presumably our Lord taught the disciples the Lord's Prayer. There are at least sixty different mosaics on the walls of that church, each giving us the Lord's Prayer in a different language. I cherish to this day the person who was thoughtful enough to buy a memento from that place that has the Lord's Prayer in Arabic, the language in which my father and my mother prayed that prayer. That's one of my favorite churches.

Another of my favorite churches is the one that overlooks the beautiful Sea of Galilee, where our Lord presumably taught His disciples what it is to be blessed in this life, what it is to be a truly happy person, happy with yourself, happy with other people, happy with God.

But the third church that I'm about to mention for you has its claim upon my soul as none other has. It's sometimes referred to as The Church Of All Nations. It's built close by the Garden of Gethsemane -- in fact, the two are related to each other, because just outside the church is the Garden of Gethsemane, and you can't get into the church unless you pass by that garden in which our Lord agonized.

There are a number of things about that church that I could relate for you now, but for the purpose that's to be served in relationship with this sermon is the fact it was built by contributions from devout Christians in all nations of the world . . . but specifically, because it faces the Golden Gate of the ancient Wall of Jerusalem, a gate, as it's been said, that when our Blessed Lord returns, people from all nations of the world will follow Him into the Holy City.

Now with that in mind, hear this passage of Scripture:

" . . for there will be some who will not enter."

That sounds terribly negative, doesn't it? But I did tell you first, didn't I, that there will be those who will follow Him? The 25th chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew reads in this manner:

"When the Son of Man comes as the King, and all angels with him, he will sit on his royal throne, and the people of all the nations will be gathered before him. Then he will divide them into two groups, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats: he will put the sheep at his right and the goats at his left. Then the King will say to the people on his right: 'You who are blessed by my Father: come! Come and receive the kingdom which has been prepared for you ever since the creation of the world. I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.' The righteous will then answer him: 'When, Lord, did we ever see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we ever see you sick or in prison, and visit you?' The King will answer back, 'I tell you, indeed, whenever you did this for one of these poorest brothers of mine, you did it for me!'"

Then he will say to those on his left: 'Away from me, you who are under God's curse! Away to the eternal fire which has been prepared for the Devil and his angels! I was hungry but you would not feed me, thirsty but you would not give me drink; I was a stranger but you would not welcome me in your homes, naked but you would not clothe me; I was sick and in prison but you would not take care of me.' Then they will answer him: 'When, Lord, did we ever see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and we would not help you?'"

. . . you know how it ends.

The text for all that you're about to hear comes from that passage of Scripture:

" . . before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them, one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats."

For almost thirty years, now, that Winifred and I have been among you, when we head for the hills-of-home we travel a 207-mile stretch from where you are seated to a tranquil acre or so just beyond the city in which I was born, and just over the hill from where Winifred was born in that homestead. Years ago that 207-mile stretch was known as the Susquehanna Trail, so named, of course, because of the river that parallels that concrete path.

Recently I noted what could be referred to as the 'disappearing signs' -- not that somebody has come along, very ambitious, and said, "Let's clean up the road-side and get rid of these unattractive signs!" -- there are still any number of signs on the road-side, but there are some that were once there that have since disappeared.

It used to be that on an average of every fifty miles we could find at least four or five of the signs to which I am referring. Some were fashioned from a rough piece of lumber, nailed unevenly on some tree, or a post. Others were far more attractive, but presumably -- undoubtedly -- by a commercial artist, put on a huge poster board, even illuminated at night.....signs that would read in this manner:

"BEWARE OF THE WRATH OF GOD"

....."THE WAGES OF SIN IS DEATH"

....."WHERE WILL YOU SPEND ETERNITY?"

....."PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD"

Although not particularly known as the Bible Belt, a quarter-of-a-century ago such signs as these were quite common in that particular section of the Keystone State. Now they seem to be considerably fewer.

I'd be less than honest if I didn't tell you that there were times when I'd be driving along, and one of those signs would catch my eye -- "PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD""WHERE WILL YOU SPEND ETERNITY?" -- -- that I almost felt like pulling off the road, reaching for my Bible, having a prayer session, getting my life in order, -- particularly if just a mile away I had seen a fatal accident, and now realizing that perhaps in that stretch ahead that would always be a possibility for me. Those signs triggered such kinds of reaction in my mind: "PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD."

I must tell you that I often wish they could have been more encouraging, that is, striking a note of God's love and His goodness. I think you've discovered by this time that I am the kind of person who talks much more about the love of God than the wrath of God. I'd like to be remembered as the pastor among you who would tell you repeatedly that God loves you, and that God wants to find you in Heaven, and that as we encourage one another on our way here, it makes it easier for some of us to stay on the path. I hope you'll remember me as the pastor who did strike that note.

I think I am the kind of person who'd much rather be drawn to God by His love rather than avoid Hell just because of the torment of the damned. And I must admit that I dislike shoddy signs, most of them were crudely done. and I'm sure that I don't appreciate scare tactics where the Gospel is concerned. Yet it can and must be said that messages, no matter how crudely scrawled, of an impending Judgement Day serve a useful purpose. We all need to be reminded of the fact that according to teachings of our Blessed Lord, that there is such a thing as Judgment Day -- that there will be a line drawn, as I

told you last Sunday -- a dividing line, on one side of which is Heaven, and on the other side there is Hell. Someone I love as I love none other once told me how when she was a child her mother would say to her: "Be careful where you go, be careful what you do, because any day could be Judgment Day; don't be found anywhere, don't be found doing anything, that would be displeasing to Jesus when He comes again."

I know how sophisticated you are, I know how difficult it is for some of you to appreciate such godly admonition -- I have no other phrase for it than that -- godly admonition. Many mothers, they tell me, or fathers as well, don't much talk like that to their children any more. How sad! Too bad! While I must tell you now that I never could get too excited about that New England preacher, one of the Mather boys, who a couple of centuries ago could hold his congregation spell-bound and on the edge of their seats for two-and-a-half hours as he frightened his hearers from the very brink of Hell, by describing all as "sinners in the hand of an angry God." Nonetheless, I hasten to add, we are the poorer when we make light of the fact of Judgment or down-play the need to deal with the element of personal responsibility.

It's been said that Daniel Webster once found himself in the company of people who put to him a very interesting question, and the question was this: "Mr. Webster, would you please tell us, what is the most profound thought that you've ever had in your life?" Now, some of us know people who have never had a serious thought in their life. They don't know what it is to think in depth. But suppose someone put a question like that to you: "What is the most profound thought that you've ever entertained?"

Maybe one reason is that we don't think in this vein, that we don't allow ourselves enough time to think! The man who was President of the Lutheran Church in America the year I was ordained was quite a wit, who once observed, "Take time to think -- you have little competition." -- to think and to think deeply. We bring honor to God when we exercise our mental faculty. It always troubles me when I sit with some people and discover how much hazy, fuzzy thinking is done....when our perceptions are blurred because we don't take time to think profoundly.

Well I'm not forgetting what I told you, -- "Mr. Webster," said someone in the company in which he was found, "What's the most profound thought that ever passed through your mind?"

....I can appreciate this. Before he answered he looked at the different people in the room, and he said, "You really want me to answer? -- am I free to answer without being embarrassed? -- do you really want to know?".....

It was at least twenty-two years ago that we dared to believe that the people of this parish would respond to the opportunity of coming on the first day in Lent to a simple service, any hour on the hour, from 7:00 o'clock in the morning through 8:00 o'clock in the evening. In the more than two decades which have passed, the people of this congregation have responded as they've always responded to any challenge. As you have come now, so other congregations before you have been here, beginning at 7:00 o'clock this morning and through 8:00 o'clock tonight when the 14th service of the day will be the concluding one.

What we do is amazingly simple, and we need to keep that in mind. First, there is the reading of a passage of Scripture, then a brief meditation, and then as you approach the altar you make your own personal confession to God. And as a Pastor of the Church I am given the authority to lay hands in blessing upon you and declare in the name of Jesus Christ that you are forgiven. And then as you continue to remain at the altar, the Sacrament is offered. Everything as simple, as quiet, as earnest as that.

Now if my memory serves me correctly, it's been this passage of Scripture that's been read repeatedly throughout these decades on this first day in Lent:

" . . . And taking the twelve he said to them, 'Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written of the Son of man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be delivered to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated, and spat upon. They will scourge him and kill him, and on the third day he will rise.' But they understood none of these things and this saying was hid from them, and they did not grasp what was said.

As he drew near to Jericho a blind man was sitting by the road-side begging, and hearing a multitude going by he inquired what this meant. They told him, Jesus of Nazareth is passing by; and he cried, 'Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me,' and those who were in front rebuked him and told him to be silent. But he cried out the more, 'Son of David, have mercy on me.' And Jesus stopped, commanded him to be brought to him; and when he came near he asked him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' He said, 'Lord, let me receive my sight.' And Jesus said, 'Receive your sight, your faith has made you well.' And immediately he received his sight and followed him, glorifying God. And all the people, when they saw, gave praise to God . . . "

Now we need to note at once that this passage of Scripture can be divided into two segments. The first segment is this: Jesus Christ indicated to his friends, the disciples, how His ministry was going to wind up, and He was giving them something that was far from a pleasant prospect. He said, "When I get to Jerusalem, this is the way it's going to end -- shamefully treated, spat upon, scourged . . ." He would be killed, and the third day He'd rise again. But they didn't understand that. Now you heard me say it, Jesus is telling His precious friends that that's the way it's going to end.

You have to remember why Jesus came into the world, this is very important. Jesus came into the world to love, to help, to heal, to show people the way to heaven. Now, one might think that people would respond favorably. But Jesus Christ recognizes the reality of the situation.....

- He did live in a world where not everyone wanted to be good.....
- He did live in a world where some people, rather than loving, would prefer to hate...
- He did live in a world where some people, rather than to help, would want to hurt...
- He did live in a world where some people would prefer to move in the direction of Hell than to be wooed toward Heaven...

Jesus was a realist, and told it as it was.

Which leads me to say to you that sooner or later some of us have to admit, albeit reluctantly, that life is never lived on our terms. You see, we'd like to love, we'd like to help, we'd like to heal, we'd like to believe that all people want to be drawn toward heaven. But life isn't lived on our terms, and eventually we may have to conclude that we have to come to terms with life, and recognize the real world for what it is, unpleasant as the prospect may be. But that doesn't mean that we have to compromise. It simply means we have to live by a conviction that even though people may wish to hate instead of love, that gives us no license, no liberty to do anything except to go on loving. And that's precisely why this second segment of Scripture is so important. Jesus portrayed the world as it really is and told how the unhappy prospect was ahead for Him and then.

And as He passes through Jericho on His way to Jerusalem, where the untoward, the ugly and the unfortunate would take place, He encounters a blind beggar who cries out for attention. Granted Jesus, realizing the world for Him was going to end the way it

would, He could have excused Himself and said, What's the use? -- Why go on loving? Why go on helping? But to the contrary, in this real world what does Jesus do? He does what a child and a servant of God is meant to do -- He helps, and pays attention, and meets needs. Wouldn't it be a terrible thing if Jesus Christ had not given us that example? Who'd want to go on living in a world where there are people who may prefer to hate, to hurt?

As we begin the Lenten pilgrimage we place deliberately in front of you the cross. Whether you call it a pilgrimage or a journey, life means you go from one point to another, and somewhere ahead, if you haven't encountered it already, there's a cross -- unavoidable....inescapable. In a real world there will always be crosses.

You've noticed by this time that I don't call it a Lenten journey, I call it a Lenten pilgrimage. Properly understood, a pilgrimage is a journey that one takes only with this difference: it's a journey that you take and as you travel on your way you stop at holy places to pray. The Lenten pilgrimage is our season and our opportunity to stop in the journey of life to pray. And when we pray we get a surge of strengthand when we pray we're united anew with the God who made the world and knows how the world was meant to operate....

-- a world that may have a Good Friday

....but a world that also has an Easter!

Evil may have its Good Friday. God has an eternity and gives us an Easter. Evil may be strong, but love is stronger.

Now as we approach the altar we make ready to confess our sins

(personal Absolution)

(transcribed as recorded)

Well, this is the way he answered, and I think I have a direct quote for you. Here it is, as he answered what was the most profound thought that he ever had:

"My personal responsibility to God, and the prospect of eventually being judged by God, for who I am and what I have done."

Any number of us who are closer to 70 than we are to 60 rise up today and thank God for those persons who in our formative years made perfectly plain to us that there is such a thing as personal responsibility, that there is such a thing as accountability before the Throne of God. How else do you interpret Judgment Day? It's going to come, and when it most certainly comes, as it will, it's unavoidable, it is inescapable.

I'm strengthened and encouraged by the way the old rabbi thought of Judgment. You can think of it in many ways as you interpret the Biblical understanding of it. But the old rabbi thought of Judgment as each of us standing alone, in front of God -- and the entire earthly pilgrimage is over, the once, never-again-to-be-repeated journey is finished. And God looks us in the eye, each of us, and says, with the wave of His hand: "Well, what did you make of it?"

....you understand now, the once, never-again-to-be-repeated journey is over, and in the time of Judgment God says:

"What did you make of it?"

For almost three decades I have been coming to this sacred desk, encouraging you to make the most of it, whatever time God gives you. For almost three decades I have been trying to show you the way to Heaven. For almost three decades I have been trying to encourage you to help each other on the way to Heaven. For almost three decades I have been telling you, you don't have to go to Hell....

....I have been telling you about Jesus Christ, whose outstretched arms are wooing you in His direction, and that's the only way you ever get to the gate of Heaven -- as you keep your eye on Him, and live day by day by His fear, and with His favor. And that's a happy thought!

* * *

(transcribed as recorded)

"SEVEN DEADLY SINS: LUST"

O GOD, the world is too much with us,
so much so that we make so little
time to do this sort of thing, to
give some measure of undivided at-
tention to the interpretation of
Your Word. That we should make
the most of it, cleanse us now from
sin and make us fit by Your Holy
Spirit to think Your thoughts.
Through Jesus Christ, Thy Son our
Lord, who when He came, came preach-
ing. Amen.

When I became your Pastor, I had but one objective: to spend whatever time God would allow me to be with you to exalt the Lord Jesus Christ and to hold Him always before you as your Master and as your Savior. If you have ever for any moment wondered what I have been about, there should be no question on this score. My only justification for having been with you is to exalt the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior. And realizing full well that this would be the last series of Lenten sermons that I would preach from the Saint Luke pulpit, I chose deliberately the Deadly Sins. There is no way in God's world that you can ever appreciate Jesus Christ as Savior if you don't recognize what it is you're being saved from.

For reasons that I can hardly understand, we don't much talk about sin. The fact is this: that we either choose to ignore it, ridicule it, make light of it, or use fancy names for it, and thus excuse ourselves from taking the fact of sin seriously. And whenever that happens, we do so at great peril.

This morning as I stand among you it's the second in the series on the Deadly Sins, the sin called LUST. I am quite frank when I tell you that there are some people who tell me that we ought not to talk about it, that there are some things better left unsaid. But I'm not a preacher whose lips are sealed. Anyone who stands at the sacred desk with the Bible in front of him is constrained to speak - he has no choice if he is to fulfill his calling in the name of Jesus Christ.

I must talk to you about lust. It's one of the ugliest of sins. I must talk to you about it because the Bible talks about it. The Bible doesn't ignore it. Even in the Book of Proverbs -- who would ever think that the Book of Proverbs would concern itself with the sin of lust? What else is it doing when it says:

"Keep thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life."

There's a text for this sermon. The Apostle Paul, who got around a great deal, and who didn't have blinders on his eyes, who saw so much, simply had to tell those Christians who lived in Rome a thing or two....and when you read that 13th chapter, you come across this verse. I'm going to read it for you first from the King James translation, the way I memorized it as a youngster, and then I'm going to read it for you in the fresh way from J. B. Phillips' modern translation, which makes it quite crystal, and perfectly clear:

"Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying: But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof . . ."

Get ready for J. B. Phillips:

" . . . Let us live cleanly, as in the daylight, not in the 'delights' of getting drunk or playing with sex, nor yet in quarrelling or jealousies. Let us be Christ's men from head to foot, and give no chances to the flesh to have its fling. . ."

....curt, clear, concise, complete. Presumably, of all the sins, the sin of lust is a sin of the flesh.

Now I must tell you that I have a high regard for a Scottish writer, a prolific writer, who not so long ago wrote a book called, "Ethics Of A Permissive Society." I used to keep it close by my reading desk. I found it helpful to turn to it repeatedly. The author dedicated his book to two people, significantly enough -- his granddaughters. As a grandparent, I can appreciate that. Why does God allow us to live as long as some of us have lived if not for the simple reason, to allow others to know some of the things that we have seen along the way? -- some of the facts of life that we've discovered and we feel in duty bound to tell them to our grandchildren.

As an example, some of us have traveled far enough along the road to know that there are fences that have been put up, and one of the things we've learned is this: you don't take down the fences until you first find out why they were put up in the first place.

Now back to this book. In his first chapter, a couple of sentences or so, he says,

"When I was young and first entered the ministry, the great battle-cry was: 'Don't bother about theology -- just stick to ethics.' People would say, 'Stop talking about the Trinity, the two natures of Jesus and all that sort of thing -- just stick to ethics...'
' . . . never mind theology -- just stick to the Sermon on the Mount, and let the abstractions and the abtrusions, the philosophy, the mysticism go...'

People said, 'Take theology away -- I can't understand it anyway.'

"But 30 years ago no one ever really questioned the Christian ethic; 30 years ago, no one, so it seemed, ever doubted that divorce could be disgraceful, that illegitimate babies could be a disaster."

I can remember, honestly I can -- I'm referring now to what he says in his book -- when chastity was thought about as a good thing. It was a brave and bold thing for that person, whose name I have forgotten for the moment, who wrote an article for the New York Times, of all papers, and the piece that she wrote was entitled: "In Praise Of Being A Virgin."

"30 years ago," says this writer, "no one doubted that an honest day's work was part of the duty of an honest and respectable person, that honesty ought to be part of a person's life. But today . . ."

(now listen to the author as he went on to conclude)

" . . . today, for the first time in history, the whole Christian ethic is under attack. It is not only theology that people want to abandon, it's ethics as well. For ours is a permissive age: do anything as you want to do as long as it feels good! Don't let anyone get in your way! Be yourself! . . ."

It irked me no end when a couple of years ago I stopped at the intersection down here opposite the department store at Colesville Road, and there, emblazoned on one of the plate glass windows, the slogan, the motto, the jargon of that day, bandied around so much: I'VE GOTTA BE ME. I've no great quarrel with self-expression, unless one begins to think in terms of what it is that he wants to express! One of the grand and good things that we have going for us within the Christian frame-work is this: that we are encouraged to be the best possible Me, that we're encouraged to behave like children of God -- not just be any Me. But if I may put it as forthrightly as I can, to be God's kind of person.

When I was still in college, one of the boards of our Church got out what they thought was a very helpful pamphlet, and I presume the writer was very impressed with the title he had chosen: "Making Your Life Count." But even then, young as I was, I raised the question for myself: Why won't somebody take issue with that title? That's not enough. It's never enough just to say, "Make your life count" -- your life is going to count. Every person's life counts. The question is: What will it count for? You crave self-expression, but what are you going to express? As far as this sermon is concerned, will it be ape - or - angel? The choice is ours.

And that's the heinous thing about the sin of lust. It reduces us to the level of an animal, the satisfaction of an appetite, sensually speaking -- nothing beyond the enjoyment of the moment. It's part and parcel of the philosophy: "Eat, drink and be merry" -- now -- this moment!

You've heard me say it before, I am so grateful that I grew up in a small town, I'm

so grateful that I grew up in a town that was surrounded by rural areas, farmers everywhere. I am so grateful that our two sons had the chance to spend a considerable amount of their time every summer on their grandfather's farm, where they learned so much from the lessons of the good soil, but especially when they learned as I hoped they learned from watching the animals -- there is such a thing as animal-like behavior.

The heinous thing about lust is that it's a sin of the flesh; the heinous thing about lust is, it's a violation of love. Love is the grandest and the most noble thing that God has ever allowed a single person to know. Every single one of us is capable of loving. And when you love, you're never nearer to God! The grand definition for God, aside from the fact that He's father-like, is that three-word definition for God: "God is love." And when you really love, you meet the need in the life of a person...

-- when you really love, you pay attention to that person...

-- when you really love, you respect that person as a brother
or a sister in Christ...

-- when you really love, you look upon that person whose body
is the temple of the Holy Ghost.

But lust. Lust is a different story. Lust does not think in terms of a continuing relationship. Lust simply grabs, for the moment. Let me be as plain as I can possibly be, and if you want to settle for no other term than this: a pastor-grandfather who is speaking - - - a person who's been married for almost 45 years, and who knows how perfectly beautiful the experience of sex is meant to be, because it involves a continuing relationship, because it involves an ongoing identification. In the Old Testament the word for the sexual act always involved "and he knew her" -- which means identification and concern and regard! Love goes to bed at night and may thoroughly enjoy the identification of two bodies as a perfectly beautiful expression of a relationship. Love goes to bed at night and looks forward to having breakfast in the morning. Lust, on the other hand, hops in and out of bed, and that's it! -- no concern for any continuing relationship, no regard for the object, which in every case happens to be a human being. And human beings from the Christian perspective were never meant to be seen as objects, to be used, and whose relationship was to be exploited.

The heinous thing about lust is it's the abuse of love, it cheapens it, it gratifies an appetite for the moment. The heinous thing about lust is, it's really from the waist down, which is really to say it's from the head down. Small wonder, then, the writer of the Book of Proverbs could say, "Keep thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life." That's why we have to be very careful of what we read . . . that's why we have to be very careful of what we see . . . that's why we

have to be very careful of what we think -- and even sometimes the very words that we speak can excite another person sensually.

I don't know of anything, really, that concerns me more when I think of the younger generation specifically, and people in mid-life, than the kind of things that are being published and the kinds of motion pictures that people are seeing -- and the manner by which they can look upon another person with never any inclination to control their thoughts where lust is involved. I don't care how many psychologists talk to you about repression and suppression. From the Christian perspective, we can suppress our desires. It is possible for us to have them sublimated. Thomas Mann in his excellent book on JOSEPH IN EGYPT brings to our attention how Joseph in that moment, being seduced by Potiphar's wife, knew very well that he did not have to succumb to seduction -- attractive as she made it!

There was a time when I watched Archie Bunker. I remember the time he referred to a time of indiscretion, and he was confessing to his wife. He fumbled along as only Archie can fumble, and finally he said, "It all happened because I didn't know where I was going...and before I knew it, I was there."

* * *

(transcribed as recorded)

"SEVEN DEADLY SINS: ANXIETY"
(Matthew 6)

WE DO believe, O God, that there are some things that You wait to give us only as we are part of a gathered company within the shadow of an altar and where a sacred desk has been raised up. Let that happen to us now, that there should be an echo of the Eternal Voice, no matter how feeble nor frail, that could speak to our condition. Through Jesus Christ Thy Son, our Lord, who when He came, came preaching. Amen.

These sermons this Lenten season of 1985, as you should know by this time, are based upon the general theme of DEADLY SINS. Why in heaven's name Pope Gregory, in the Middle Ages, when he began to catalogue certain sins as deadly -- seven, I think, in number -- he never included anxiety, or worry, I don't know. For I'm absolutely certain, as far as I'm concerned, whenever I begin to list deadly sins, anxiety and worry is high on my list.

At some risk I'm willing to confess to you, I worry. I would worry if I didn't worry, because I am awed by the sense of responsibility whenever I stand at this sacred desk, lest I not proclaim the saving grace of Jesus Christ, the ministry to which I was called.

I worry when on occasion I have an encounter with you, whatever it may be -- in a committee meeting, in a personal counseling session, or in an occasional greeting on the patio . . . lest when that encounter is over I have failed as the shepherd and bishop of your souls to share with you some measure of the ingredient of the Eternal Dimension. I worry lest I should fail my Lord and my Savior. For when I became your Pastor I became your Pastor because I told Him I was willing to assume the responsibility of being the shepherd and bishop of your souls, and that is no small thing. I worry lest I should fail you -- lest I should fail my Lord.

I wish it were otherwise. In recent weeks, in recent months, and for an entire year, I have worried far more than any of you have any idea. I have worried regarding the emotional and spiritual health of this parish....

-- I have worried about inter-personal relationships that have changed..

-- I have worried about people who speak, not having proper information..

- I have worried about people who make value judgments without having the benefit of being part of an entire decision-making process..
- I could worry about myself and my future....

I do worry. I'm ashamed to tell you that. It is my besetting sin.

I draw some measure of comfort, of course, in realizing that most people worry. But I am chastened and I am rebuked when I remember the words of our Blessed Lord, even as Matthew the Gospel recorder, wrote them down as the 6th chapter, the 25th verse, the words spoken by Jesus Christ: you can't misunderstand them, the words are simply these:

" . . Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious . . . "

Translation: "Therefore get it straight as far as I'm concerned -- you are not to worry."

Now when God speaks, people ought to listen. But I don't always listen. And I worry.

I'm going to do something now, I'm going to pause for this moment to read for you an extract of another preacher's sermon. I do it deliberately now, and for several reasons. One, the tremendous respect that I have for the person who wrote these words. Fortuitously enough, he once preached and graced the pulpit of Saint Luke Church. He was an invited guest when he came here for a seminar. I suppose he's in his 80's now. He's been a president of one of our theological seminaries, a marvelous teacher, a great preacher -- Dr. Alvin Rogness. I share these words with you because they have spoken to my condition. I've almost worn this book out as I've read page after page.

I especially appreciate it because it's been written out of the fulness of his ministry. This is not a novice who speaks to us. And he's talking now about some of the things that give us cause for worry:

" . . . An eminent psychiatrist friend of mine once said that everyone lives with a sense of imminent catastrophe. Any moment one's world could fall apart.

In recent years I've sometimes awakened in the morning wondering whether the world would hold together another day. The problems are so great and the world so interrelated that if one part collapses, won't the whole structure crumble, like a house of cards, into total chaos? In this mood I dress, go to the kitchen for a cup of strong coffee, and read prayers that others have written (I couldn't put together a cheerful one for myself). By the time I get out with other people I have a feeling that the world will hold together, at least for another day.

Don't we all live with a feeling of catastrophe around the corner? My friend is right. A heart attack could fell me. I could get a telephone call that one of my children or grandchildren has been killed.

We were totally unprepared that night of August 18, 1960, when

two policemen came to our door to tell us our son Paul was killed. In the years following, whenever our children and grandchildren are due to arrive, I'm a bit uneasy until they're at the door, and when they leave I'm nervous when the telephone rings until I know they're safely home.

It's not that I'm semi-paralyzed, thinking of the worst that could happen, but tucked down somewhere in my consciousness is the awareness of the uncertainties of life.

Nor was it Paul's death alone that brought this awareness of the catastrophic. I was 17 when five of the seven banks in Sioux Falls closed their doors in 1923. That same year my father's store burned to the ground one dry, October night. In 1929 the stock market crash sent the country and the world into unprecedented hard times. And during the war in the '40s I shared the fears of families in my congregation who lived daily with the dread of a telegram: 'It is with deep regret that the office of the U.S. Army informs you that your son . . . ' "

I can identify with Alvin Rogness, I can relate to him. For I too have been totally unprepared for what I suddenly found around the corner. I worry. I ought not to worry. But who doesn't worry? Most people worry. And if some of us find people who don't worry, we worry because we think they ought to worry.

-- young people worry - - and that troubles me, honestly it does, grandfather that I am. Young people ought to have smiles on their faces, they ought to go through life tripping through the daisies. But for the first time we have a generation of young people on our hands who are being made aware of the fact that there is such a thing as nuclear annihilation. They worry that they might not live long enough to do all that they would like to do -- that their world could be taken away from them before they have a chance to live, fully. People worry. Young people worry.

-- and now I'm troubled, honestly I am, because I went through it and didn't realize it could happen to me -- they tell me now that there is such a thing as mid-life crisis. And people worry about it. It happens to people that they love. It could happen to you. So people worry at mid-life -- the promotions aren't going to come as they once did....the records show that they're not just what they once thought they were....

-- and then old people worry - - will they curtail my Social Security payment? What with inflation the way it is, will I have enough to live out the rest of my life? Young people worry that they might not live as long as they'd like....old people worry because they live too long!

...Grossmuder, that adorable mother-in-law of mine -- Winifred's getting set for Grossmuder's centennial on April 21 -- Grossmuder has all kinds of worries. She has to adjust periodically; over the past seven years, what is it? -- ten different room-mates, and

each room-mate brings a completely different set of idiosyncracies. She worries about what tomorrow might bring, deep child of faith that she remains.

We all worry. How do you handle it? Well I'll tell you how some people handle it. They give their worries to somebody else. She's not here this morning -- she ordinarily sits where you are seated, Ann -- she doesn't mind my telling you this story. It's as real as I can make it, and it happened here among us. She was German as all get-out -- he was as Irish as they come, happy-go-lucky. After he died and she was working through the grief process, she finally called some things as they really were. So in a precious note which she wrote me she said, "You're free to share it with people," she said, "He never had a worry in the world. He gave them all to me!" And that, I'm happy to tell you, is what made their marriage -- they realized that, she compensated for that, she accepted that! And that's something to think about.

I recall a staff member that we once had, now of blessed memory, of whom I was very, very fond, but he could drive me to distraction on occasion because he'd bring me a problem, and he'd put it on my desk....and he'd walk out the door, completely relaxed because now he had put it on my desk! You'll permit me now, won't you, indulge me for the second -- how I keep my sanity, one of the reasons, how I keep my sanity these days -- I delight in telling this story....

...Sarah discovered that Abie wasn't sleeping, he was tossing and turning. She said, "Abie, what ails you? Tell me, Abie, what ails you??" He got up, pointed his finger across the hall to the tenant opposite him, And he said, "Jakey -- he lives across the hall -- I owe him \$10,000, it's due tomorrow morning. I can't sleep! Sarah, love of my life and light of my soul, I can't sleep!" Sarah, God bless her, she jumps out of bed, she raises the window, she yells for Jakey....and Jakey hears her. Jakey opens the window. "Jakey! Jakey! My husband Abie, he owes you \$10,000, it's due tomorrow!"....she slams the window. She says, "Now," to her husband, "you go to bed, you sleep. You let him worry."

....that's one way of handling your worries.

I'm not so sure that I recommend it.

But there is a salutary side to this whole business of assuming responsibility, and it cannot be evaded, cannot be avoided:

- I worry about people who say things that are not true....
- I worry about people who say things that hurt other people....
- I worry about people who are fracturing this very Body of Christ...

-- I worry about people, whether by ignorance or by deliberate design hurt the most precious thing that we have, a sense of family....

I also recognize the fact that there are some things over which I have no control:

-- I can't control what some people say....

-- I can't control what some people think....

-- I can't control what some people do....

But by the grace of God I must concern myself and I must learn, lest I do not discharge my obligation with integrity and in a responsible manner.

Now, when I have done with it, or as the old man said to his grandson, "Son, do the best you can, and leave the rest with God" -- that's where we may have to settle, at that particular point. When I read that 6th chapter of Matthew I'm impressed all over again with the way Jesus handles this problem of worry. Basically, I'm going to give you a free translation. Maybe you can do it as I've done it: to all intents and purposes when Jesus addresses the subject of worry, the things about which we worry, he says, "Let me make a bargain with you -- you're worried about food, you're worried about clothing, you're worried about shelter, you're worried about your resources.... let me tell you something . . ." And recklessly I am reading that 6th chapter -- you can go back and read it for yourself....essentially Jesus is saying to us:

" . . . I'll make a bargain with you. If you want to worry about food, go ahead and worry about food -- but you worry about people who don't have food. If you want to worry about clothing, you go ahead and worry about clothing -- worry about them, but worry about people who don't have clothing. You're worried about your salvation? All right -- you worry about it, but trust me to take care of what you can't take care of!"

I can't walk away from the sacred desk without reading for you something that appeared a number of years ago in a statement that was issued by the U.S. Public Health Service, in connection with the prevalence of nervous diseases, the tendency to worry, to weaken, to shorten life, and this statement was the following observation, no doubt suggested by the words of Jesus . . .

"So far as is known, no bird ever tried to build more nests than its neighbor; no fox ever fretted because he had only one hole in which to hide; no squirrel ever died of anxiety lest he should have only laid by enough for one winter instead of two....and no dog ever lost any sleep over the fact that he had not enough bones laid aside for his declining years . . . "

I am reluctant to tell you this but I have to tell it to you because I've addressed this same thought to my own soul: when I worry needlessly, I become a practicing atheist. When you worry overmuch, you attempt to control things, take it away from the hand of God. We are all in the hand of God, whether with our belief or our unbelief, whether with our fear or with our failure, whether with our goodness or with our sin. God will always have the last word. Maybe my basic worry should be my willingness to trust Him, not only with the last word, but what He's trying to get through to me now. This I believe.

* * *

(transcribed as recorded)

"SEVEN DEADLY SINS: PRIDE"

(Luke 18)

THROUGH JESUS CHRIST, our
Blessed Lord. Amen.

Before I read for you the passage of Scripture that inspires all that you're about to hear, let me suggest, if you don't mind, that we talk about ourselves this morning. Now you may choose or not choose to want to do that, but I am making the suggestion that within the shadow of this altar we make bold to talk about ourselves.

In order to assist you, I'm going to read a passage of Scripture, a passage of Scripture that deals with two people with whom Jesus Christ concerns Himself as He told the story. He told the story for a purpose, because undoubtedly He had in mind that every single one of us has some image that we carry around of ourselves of which we are aware, or may not be made aware. And if that image should be something less than salutary, then perchance what Jesus had to say to the people to whom He spoke could hold us in good stead, even as He directed His words to them. Now we have it straight, don't we? We're going to talk about ourselves -- you, and me.

" . . . He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others: 'Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.' . . . "

That's the way Jesus would do it every now and then, He'd draw a stark contrast in order to make a dent on the fabric of certain people's minds. He had a target when He said what He did. His words were aimed directly at a certain type of person. Now you'll find those introductory words to the words that I just read in that 18th chapter of Luke in this manner: "And He spoke this parable to certain who trusted themselves, that they were righteous and despised others."

Now, let's talk about ourselves in the light of the fact that people sometimes can be cast into two categories: people who are very, very much pleased with themselves; and

people who are not pleased with themselves. I've lived long enough to be absolutely convinced that we can suffer from one of two complexes: either a superiority, or an inferiority complex, and either can be equally damaging. For the moment, if you don't mind, let me say all the good things to you now that the Pharisee was able to say about himself. He had a track record with which he was quite pleased, and when he went to church he couldn't wait until he had a chance to talk to God, and to tell God how good he had been. And you could agree, no doubt! He's the kind of person that presumably any among us would be very happy to have listed on the roster of this congregation:

- one: he showed up, figuratively speaking, every time the church doors were opened -- not spasmodically, not occasionally -- but every time....
- secondly: he had an exemplarily record in stewardship; he wasn't the kind of person who would wait until the committee on stewardship would send out maybe three letters, called him three times on the phone to remind him, or even promised to come by and just sit down and talk about the work of the Lord and how much the work of the Lord doesn't fall down from heaven fully fashioned, but it has to move from the earth toward heaven with hands that help to advance it, and reach down deep into their pocketbooks to get something that they can give graciously, and then place it before the altar of the Lord. He wasn't that kind of a fellow at all!

....in fact, he was the kind of a fellow who said of the church, even in that day, as we Lutherans try to root ourselves in Scriptural truth, and in our practices and in our preaching we follow Biblical prescriptions: the Bible recommends tithing, a tenth of what you receive. And this chap was telling God how well he had done in that manner....

- he also said that if the church prescribes that I fast, no matter what the rules and regulations -- "Count on me, Lord -- I'll do it!"

Well, something to be said for a fellow like that, isn't there? Think what would happen in this congregation if every single person took his religious practices that seriously!

Now on the other hand, Jesus tells the story about the other chap, who also showed up in church -- about as far back as he could get from the altar, remaining as unobtrusive as he could possibly be. And all that he could say, "I don't have much to say, Lord." According to the way Jesus told it, he didn't have a single thing that he could muster up to his credit. All he could say was, "I'm a sinner....have mercy!"

Now let's back up a bit. Already you've discovered that this is a sermon that's going to deal with pride. When Pope Gregory, in the Middle Ages, classified sins as

being far more serious than other sins (and I could fault him on that score because any sin is serious) . . . but he did have a way of thinking that some sins are far more important than others because of the effect they have on the way we live out our lives -- he named seven deadly sins. He had no difficulty at all in saying "chiefest of the deadly sins is the sin of pride."

Now you and I back off a bit on that because we know people who spend perfectly good money in going to see a psychiatrist, only to have a psychiatrist say, in exchange for a fee, "Your trouble, brother, is that you suffer from a low self-image -- you don't have a very good opinion of yourself, you penalize yourself." Now I know very well that you and I say to people sometimes "you ought to take more pride in yourself." I know for myself how impatient I get with people who don't take a measure of pride in their work, who won't do the best job they possibly can. I become infuriated by people who settle for mediocrity, for mediocrity, no matter how high grade, is still mediocrity...

...and I suppose any pastor who anticipates walking away from a parish he's loved and served wonders sometimes how he might be remembered. I would like to be remembered by you, in the name of God, for a number of things -- and not the least of all of them (please don't misunderstand me) would be this: that I never wanted you to settle for mediocrity; and in all of our standards we try to pursue what we call the pursuit of excellence. And there's much to be said for that!

We say of someone who's sloppy in appearance or careless in his work, "He takes no pride in them," and we lament the fact that we have to make that kind of an appraisal. We even criticize people who leave others no sense of pride, who denigrate us. That can be cruel. So we talk of people who have low esteem.

I get a thrill so often when I read the Book of Hehemiah, when he went back to build the wall of Jerusalem, only to be taunted and criticized by people standing by there, who wouldn't so much as dirty their hands....and as they ridiculed him, he kept his sanity by saying, "Should such a man as I flee?" The poet is absolutely right when he reminds us:

"He who would climb and soar aloft
must ever keep alive within his soul
the tonic of a wholesome pride."

But I'm not talking about that kind of pride this morning. I'm talking about devilish pride, diabolical pride -- the kind of pride that would make a person so pleased with himself that he towers above others and never pays much attention to them, and whatever attention he pays is only that he can draw a line of contrast!....exalting his own superiority, thanking God that he's not as bad off as that person.

The basic sin of pride, chiefest of all sins, I presume is that it always puts me first. It's no accident, I suppose, as well it could be, but the central letter in pride is I. That's where it all began...when we began setting ourselves up in contrast against God's will.

Go all the way back to the very first sin -- God created the world, God called it good, the crowning glory of His creation was the human being, and He said, "You can be as I am, you can think My thoughts, you can obey Me! It's that wonderful!"

...but Adam and Eve, in their huddle together, said, "No matter what God said, we will do it our way, we'll make a determination on our terms." That's what's diabolical about sin. It acts contrary to the will of God. It exalts self -- when we want our way at any cost, we're really committing the sin of pride, we're putting ourselves first. And when we do that we tower above other people because we hold ourselves aloof from them as we separate ourselves from God. And that's contrary to what He wills.

Say it again and frequently so, that's the basic sin. It's defined in the dictionary in a number of different ways:

- inordinate self-esteem
- unreasonable conceit or superiority
- an over-weening opinion of one's own qualities

It has its synonyms and near-synonyms you know, and they're not very attractive: vanity...vain-glory...conceit...arrogance...egotism...boastfulness...self-glorification...selfishness -- many more, all of which we use as terms of reproach.

The proud man, the proud woman, the proud person sets himself or herself up, and in doing so sets himself or herself apart -- a tower is one of the commonest metaphors of pride, that makes us the lofty and inaccessible. Dorothy Sayres, God bless her, that very perceptive British writer, has maintained the devil's strategy of pride is that it attacks us -- not in our weakest points, but in our strongest. It is pre-eminently the sin of a noble mind, not only in the noble but in the righteous.

I don't know who said it, but I'm glad I remembered it: no matter how you look at pride, aside from this wholesome self-esteem, this salutary image, it constitutes a sin of neglect, because pride, when we think only of ourselves, causes us to ignore other people. Pride, when we think of ourselves and our own turf, can cause us to commit the sin of aggression and cause us to hurt other people. Pride, when you come to think of it, is a sin of condescension because it causes us to patronize others. All of these, then, turn us against our neighbor when we have been separated from God, because you can't be separated from God without becoming separated from your neighbor. You can't think of God apart from people. But there you have it.

Two men went up into the temple to pray, the one a Pharisee, the other a publican. The Pharisee thanks God that he was a goodly one....the publican was concerned that he was as bad as he was. Now what's the antidote? Constantly remind yourself that whatever you and I have, if we're going to talk about ourselves, God has given to us. What have we that we've not been given? And Martin Luther is absolutely right when he reminds us that whatever good we're able to do in this world we're able to do because God gets down deep inside us, and it is God who motivates us, it's God who encourages us.

But be careful -- Luther also reminds us that there are two devils. You thought you only had one devil on your back, didn't you? You have two. His only way of expressing it was, there's a black devil and there's a white devil -- representing the contrast. The black devil is the devil who tempts us to be bad, and you can understand that. The white devil -- even a bit more clever -- is the devil who tempts us to be good....so good that we become proud of it, pleased with ourselves.

I delight in telling the story that comes from our Roman Catholic friends. You know they have different orders in the Roman Catholic Church, and one of them said to a Franciscan, "By what is the Order of St. Francis known?" "Well," he said, "let me answer by telling you - - -

- the Augustines, they're known for their preaching....
- the Jesuits, they're known for their learning....
- the Dominicans, they're known for their teaching....
- but us Franciscans -- when it comes to humility, we're tops!"

I came here this morning to talk about pride. Be careful how you see yourself. The best of all lights in which to be seen is in the light of God's love. And that doesn't make much room for us to be pleased, unless we can say: "Thank you, God" . . . "Thank you, God" . . . "Thank you, God" . . .

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(transcribed as recorded)

"SEVEN DEADLY SINS: ANGER"
(Ephesians 4:26)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

The text for this sermon, the last in the series on the general theme of DEADLY SINS, is written in Ephesians, the 4th chapter, the 26th verse, the words of a fellow who moved around from place to place, who was a keen observer of the human scene -- he kept his finger very, very sensitively upon the pulsebeat of humanity. It didn't take him long to discover the besetting sins that cripple people. And in a letter that he wrote to people who lived in that is Minor city of Ephesus he has this simple, forth-right directive:

"Be angry, but do not sin. Let not the sun go down upon your wrath."

Come now, Paul, you can't have it both ways, can you? Are you telling us that we can be angry and yet at the same time we ought to exercise a measure of caution? Paul knew exactly what he was saying; he knew exactly what he was thinking. Anger does become the Christian. Sin can be deadly. He puts the two together in one verse:

" . . If you must be angry, be angry, but not to the extent that you commit sin."

Let me say it again, this is the last in the series of sermons based on the general theme: DEADLY SINS. Don't let the title of the series mislead you. Any sin can lead to spiritual death. No sin is ever to be taken lightly. In fact, for the moment I'm willing to say to you without any hesitation -- to take a sin lightly could be the greatest of all sins -- failure to recognize sin -- call it as such to treat it accordingly is essential to the Christian experience. Never overlook, however, that from the Christian perspective that when you talk about sin, you must always talk about the possibility of forgiveness. Both need to be reckoned with.

It is never enough just to talk about the deadly thing called sin. That's why we Christians cherish the word Gospel as a key word in our vocabulary. It means Good News. **The Good News** is this, brace yourselves: we're sinners, but we are sinners who are being saved! That's what makes the news good. The Good News is that we don't have to continue in our waywardness! "We have all sinned and come short of the glory of God. There is none righteous, no not one."

...but we don't have to continue in our wickedness, we don't have to continue recklessly or deliberately toward Hell. The Good News is this: we're meant for

Heaven -- that's our destination, that's where we're supposed to end up! Christians need to remain finely-honed on this whole sinning business. We can't possibly avoid it unless we recognize it. And we can't possibly remain free from it unless we confess it.

I've never hesitated to be transparent with you, you know that very well. And I'm going to tell you what perhaps I may have told some of you at another time. As long as God gives me memory I'll be strengthened by the recollection of it, and I'll thank God for my mother, of blessed memory. It goes back to the days of my childhood, when the milk-man came to the door, delivered milk in quart bottles. And when the bottle was emptied by the householder, it was rinsed, you see, and cleansed and put out there for the next day, when next day's delivery would come. It was sold for 10¢ a quart, and you could buy ten tickets for a dollar if you chose. Then if it was a quart of milk you wanted each day, you tore off one ticket and you put it in that bottle, and that constituted payment for next day's delivery. And many a woman put that bottle out there on her doorstep by five o'clock in the afternoon, ready for the next morning. But if she didn't have ten tickets, she put the change there.

Carleton Bennett was one of my buddies. His grandfather was John Shaffer, who lived down the street and across the street from where we lived. They had a nice back porch. And one day when Carleton and I were going by there, there was that milk bottle, a nickel inside, and five pennies. The temptation was great. Before I knew it, I had three pennies in my clutch. Home I went. And before I knew it, my mother discovered that I had three pennies that didn't belong to me. Not schooled at all with childhood and adolescent psychology....

...never taking time to think for a single moment,
what will happen to Raymond's personality if I confront him? -- will I scar him for life?....

...she only knew one thing: "Raymond, where did you get it?" I told her. "Raymond, take them back -- they don't belong to you."

Why do I mention this to you? There is modern-day tendency to treat evil that besets us in a light-hearted manner. Dr. Johnson, a straight-forward chap if ever there was one, unhesitatingly offered this advice to parents in dealing with children who could be prone to being devious, wittingly or otherwise -- "Accustom your children to constantly telling the truth. If you're inclined to think they're about to tell a lie, if they are telling you one thing and you know that it isn't true -- when they say one thing happened and it didn't happen," says Dr. Johnson, "you don't let it pass. But instantly you check with them. You simply do not know where the deviation from truth will end. It is more from carelessness about truth than from intentional lying that there is so

much falsehood in this world."

So I have come to you this morning, as I have come to you repeatedly this Lenten season, to bring to bear in each of these sermons the impact of something more than four-and-a-half decades of dealing with human nature, and as one who is and has been, and continues to be, not only an observer but also a participant in the human scene.... and at the same time as one who doesn't hesitate at all to recognize who he is: God-appointed, to interpret what I see in the light of God's love, and in the light of God's truth. The truth being that while we are all sinners, God has come to us in Jesus Christ...in order that we may be saved from sinning, and being saved from sin also means that we subscribe to the fact that we, thanks to the Holy Spirit, need not continue in our sinning, and that it is possible for us to sin less.

Now, the last sermon in this series has to deal with the so-called deadly sin of Anger. Please let it be said that while the thrust of this sermon sees anger as a deadly sin, it must be maintained, and stoutly so, there must be anger in the Christian life -- the right kind of anger. That's why the Apostle Paul, schooled as he was as a disciple of Jesus Christ, could say, "Be angry -- but don't let it lead to sin."

As for myself, I don't mind telling you, I have never been comfortable with that hymn, isn't it, that talks about "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild." Such an expression almost nauseates me. I don't want a Jesus who is blandly meek and mild. Compassionate? Yes. Tender? -- yes. Gracious? -- for God's sake, yes. But not a bland Jesus. I'm no student of art, but I've been turned off by any kind of interpretation that portrays for me Jesus as a spineless person. Would you believe me that I know a measure of joy and I'm thrilled to high heaven when I read on the pages of Scripture of an infuriated Christ! I think there must have been more than one occasion when there was fire in His eyes, thunder in His voice. And who doesn't, as such a reference, remember reading for yourself how when He went into the temple and found the money-changers exploiting the humble and honest-hearted worshippers, and with physical force drove them from the temple? Who doesn't recall reading one Scripture page after another, how with righteous indignation He talked about the wrath of God, and the fact that people could be consigned to the torments of Hell! Whatever portrait you have of Jesus Christ, make room, I beg you, for an infuriated Christ.

I'm convinced, as a student of history, that more than one gain has been made for society at large because at particular times there were people who became enraged at social injustices. I don't know what age I was in school when I was introduced to Abraham Lincoln for the first time, and there in my text-book I was told how Abraham Lincoln seeing somewhere along down the Mississippi River a human being on the auction

block. And as my teacher presumably quoted for me the words of Lincoln: "If I ever get a chance to hit that thing, I'll hit it hard!"

When I went to Brighton-By-The-Sea in England, I remembered a marvelous preacher who shepherded a congregation in that place, Frederick W. Robertson, a marvelous man of God. In one of his letters he tells about standing on a certain street corner, and having become acquainted with human nature as any pastor becomes acquainted with human nature, either inside or outside the confessional booth . . . standing there on a certain street corner he eyed a man and recognized the lust in his eyes, and how he eyed an innocent girl and was luring her into a life of sin. In his own words he said, "In anger I bit my lips until they were bleeding."

Well, I haven't come to you this morning to speak about righteous indignation except to remind you there's a place for it. And maybe eventually the test of a person's character is what it is that makes him or her angry. The Apostle Paul says, "Go ahead, be angry. But don't sin." Let's talk about the anger that can be sinful, the anger that's downright wicked.

Lance Webb has written a book called "Conquering The Deadly Sin," and in one of his chapters he talks about a musical production called "The Band Wagon" -- and he provides this quotation as two people encounter each other: "Here we are, the only animals given human speech -- here we are, snarling at each other." -- these words from the musical "Band Wagon" may serve very well not only as the confession of modern man's predicament but also as the reason for his frustration.

"...they are spoken by the hero, Tony Hunter, a once-famous movie dancer whose place in the sun in this capacity is rapidly turning into an eclipse. He is talking in a quiet spot in the garden with a famous ballet dancer, Gabrielle Girard, who has come to make up with him in order that the show in which they are to play the leading roles may continue. Instead of making up, however, they both engage in a nasty display of temper. The reasons are obvious to the audience, if not to the actors -- bitter envy on the part of Tony because Gabrielle is adept at this kind of dancing and he isn't.... anger in Gabrielle because Tony has looked down on her and minimized her talents before the entire cast. And in that quiet after the explosion Tony suddenly becomes philosophical, and this is the verdict he renders of their plight, 'We are the only animals given human speech, and here we are, snarling at each other' . . . and in their snarling at each other they destroy each other."

That's what anger does, you see, it is that destructive when uncontrolled.

There is a cure, of course, for each of us to think less of ourselves, less of our point of view, less of our pride, less of our failure and our frustration, and to treat each other with a measure of God's love and willingness to see the situation beyond our own limited perspective. But when we fail to do that we succumb to the deadly sin of anger.

Oh, I could go on, and on, and on.....

...control your tongue, my friend. No wonder it's been said:
think -- then speak. A word spoken in anger, no matter how
much we may ask that it be recalled, it has been spoken,
and damage has been done.

...and that's something to think about.

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(transcribed as recorded)

"SOMETHING WORTH REMEMBERING"
(Mark 16:6-7)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son
Jesus Christ, our Blessed Lord.
Amen.

Before the preaching of this sermon it's right and proper that a word of acknowledgment should be made in appreciation for those who have made the schedule possible for us today. The first gathering of people in Saint Luke Church this morning was at 6:30 in the Chapel of The Grateful Heart with the prayer group who gathered there. Then services on the hour -- 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 - and this one. This schedule could not be possible if it were not for those who freely and earnestly have given of their time and talent in so many ways in order that you could be here at the time that suited you best.

As I stand before you now I am fully aware of the fact that this is not the first Easter that I've spent in Saint Luke. In fact, three decades have come and gone since that very first Sunday when I preached an Easter sermon to a congregation in Saint Luke Church. In these three decades, what do you remember that I've told you? It's not meant to be an embarrassing question, but it's a question that ought to be asked. Let me answer it for you: The basic lesson is this -- Jesus Christ is alive!

On more than one occasion, in company with people I've traveled to the holy city of Jerusalem. There are some places that I've wanted to visit. The first two times I wanted to visit the Garden Tomb . . . the last couple of times I haven't bothered. Oh, I've gone there, but I didn't take the time or the energy to go inside that empty space. You see, He isn't there! Empty spaces never have meant much to me anyway. This church, empty, has little value - - it's your face, it's your personality, it's your commitment that makes this place a place of value. Now, having told you that, having said that, the lesson of lessons that's been echoed and re-echoed these Easter Sunday mornings, and also each Lord's Day -- because in a certain sense every Sunday morning celebrates the Resurrection, is the fact that Jesus Christ is risen!

What can I say to you today? I can begin now by telling you that I have a friend who on occasion asks people: "What books have you read lately?" It's a rather jolting experience for some people, because there are some folks who haven't read a book in 3 - 4 - 5 years. I've never found myself asking that question overmuch, but what I have done on occasion -- and I thoroughly enjoy meaningful conversation around the supper table --

and sometimes, much to the surprise of people present, I say, out of the clear blue sky, "Tell me, what have you learned lately?" I have been asking myself that question very earnestly, and particularly this past year. What have I learned? Life is meant to be a learning experience, and we're meant to go on learning to the very end.

Well, try this one on for size: I have learned that we live in a world where anything can happen, and frequently it does. And sometimes that anything that happens can be bad, horribly bad. But I add quickly, that sometimes that anything which can happen is good -- very, very good. In fact, almost too good to believe. And that's precisely and exactly why in the Garden experience, the people who first encountered the empty tomb found it too good to believe!...and were reluctant to accept it.

Well, we do live in a world where anything can happen. Sometimes when that anything that can happen happens, it's bad, and there are people who can't cope, who can't handle it, and react in dismay and become defeated. He was a villager in England who survived World War I. Not long after that, when the war clouds gathered again and threatened anew, it's been said that he responded in this way -- let me give you the direct quote: "If they tell me there is poison gas spewed upon us in this neighborhood, I will not reach for a poison gas mask, nor will I seek shelter in a place where I will be made free from the poisonous fumes. Rather, I will go out into the streets and I will sniff for all that I am worth, and I will say, 'That's it! The game is up!'" We live in a world where anything can happen, and sometimes when that anything happens, it's bad. And there are those who give up.

His name was Sir Edmund Gray. During World War II he looked out from his apartment window across the English Channel, and thought he could survey the European scene. And I'll give you his direct quote: "The lights of Europe are going out one by one, and I do not think that I will see them go on again in my lifetime." We live in a world where anything can happen, and sometimes that anything that happens can be bad, very bad, and people give up.

It's not simply the middle-aged and the aged who might react that way. Teenagers are not immune. The suicide rate among teenagers increases year by year. She was only 19 years of age. She had already discovered, tragically enough, that life was not treating her as fairly as she thought it should treat her. She had already found out that she lives in a world where anything can happen, and what can happen can be bad. Let me read for you the note that she wrote as she committed suicide . . . "I made a bargain with God. I told God that life wasn't turning out the way I thought it should, it was turning out bad. I would like to have it turn out much better. I gave God a year in which to do something about it, and if there'd be no change, then I'd do something about it. Well, a year has come and gone, and God hasn't come through." We live

in a world where anything can happen, sometimes that anything that happens can be bad, horribly bad.

Can you possibly imagine now how the disciples felt when they had lived with Jesus Christ for three years, trusted Him, believed Him, and saw Him to be the personification of all that was good -- never having an identity crisis in His life at all -- devoting Himself completely and earnestly to loving people and allowing God to have full and free reign in His life...

...and then after those years with Him, to have it wind up the way it did, outside the city of Jerusalem, by a city dump. Can you imagine how they felt? We live in a world where anything can happen, and sometimes that thing that happens can be bad, very bad, and the Crucifixion, it couldn't have been worse.

And that bad thing that happened so many years ago, the Crucifixion, has cast a constant pall upon all humanity, and presumably will go on to the end of time, either talking, reading or writing books, as Rabbi Kushner did, about "the bad things that happen to good people." Doesn't anything good ever happen? Sure! Remember -- we do live in a world where anything can happen, and sometimes that which happens can be good. So let me talk to you about the Resurrection.

I give that preacher high marks who, when he greeted his congregation on Easter morning, stood there, weighed his words carefully before he spoke, and then in almost an explosive fashion he looked at the congregation and he said: "You're here this morning either because you believe it did happen, or you wish that you could believe that it happened!" Hope springs eternal in the human breast -- we always want the chapter to end on a better note, and we go on believing that it will. The only ones who kept their sanity in the cruel concentration camps were those who maintained their integrity, and honestly believed that the stamp of God remained upon the fabric of their souls, and even though they were tortured by the devil himself, they went on believing. Doesn't anything good ever happen? Yes! That's why we're here this morning, that's why I'm talking to you about the Resurrection -- there you have it! Good things do happen.

We do live in a world where God sees to it that good gets done:

- that life is greater than death
- that love is stronger than hate
- that evil, while powerful, never gets beyond being

the second most powerful force in the world....

In a world where anything can happen, here's something worth remembering: God is at work, He's always up to something good.

We all need heroes in our lives, we all need giants. Pope John 23rd has been one for me. So much that he said was pregnant with meaning. As God gives me memory, I'll always want to recall this: wise old man that he was, named to the papacy in the sunset years of his life, his greater moments shining as he ended his years -- what did he say?

. . . "As you go through life you see much,
you correct a little,
and you forget a great deal . . . "

I wish he would have gone on, however, to say, "But also when you go through life, remember there are some things you ought not to forget, there are some things worth remembering, and none moreso than this: we live in a world where God is at work, and God sees that good things will happen."

If the Resurrection had not happened, what would it have meant? Pilate, that weak and vascillating man, would have had the final word....evil would have proven stronger than good...and hate stronger than love....and force stronger than righteousness. It would have shown that the last word was always with the big batallions. Is that your reading of history? Is that the reading of your own life? Is it not true that in history evil always over-reaches itself? Is it not true in your own life that the only things which have endured have been the good, the true, and the God-given? In 1935 two men were at work, one named Adolph Hitler. He was being acclaimed by screaming thousands, his name on every lip.....in England, a university village, a quiet man named Alexander Fleming was also at work, working faithfully in his laboratory, unknown except to a handful of people. Penicillin was being discovered. Does Hitler's work, or Fleming's, endure? There are some things we need to remember.

As I walk away from this sacred desk on this special day that means so much to me, I am constrained to remind you that on the same day that nuclear testing began in the South Pacific, a man died in another university town, but this one Cambridge, Massachusetts. He was 92 years of age, was remembered because he had endured so much. He gave people something to remember because he survived, he was a teacher -- a teacher of preachers. You never heard of him, no doubt -- Henry Bradford Washburn, who lived a marvelous life of usefulness and service, a man upon whom God had bestowed extraordinary gifts, and he used them lavishly for people. But very few ever knew the battles he had to fight inside himself. For we live in a world where anything can happen and any number of bad things he had to encounter -- they knew very little about the private personal turmoil of his soul. But after he died they remembered him in this way: as having lived

in a world that was often stupid, he insisted on trying to respond intelligently...they remembered him as one who lived in a world that was often cruel, but they remembered him as one who was always kind....

...as one who lived in a world that often lost its faith, but

they remembered him as one whose faith never wavered.....

He was a man of conviction, a man of integrity, who lived with loyalty minus animosity.

I remember her now so well, it just occurred to me as it did earlier today - - she lived in the most desolate spot in the world that I've ever visited, in Liberia, West Africa. I said to her, "Margaret, you have been here for 30 years. How do you keep your sanity?" She said, "Would you believe it, in this village where I live there's a certain character . . . for some unexplainable reason, who every day at the break of dawn starts beating on a drum. Raymond, I begin my day with that beat to his drum."

God's beating the drum for us! What drum-beat do you hear?

....have I given you, now, something worth remembering?

* * * *

(transcribed as recorded)

"THE BEST KEPT SECRET IN THE CHURCH."
(Ephesians 1:19-20)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

If it's a title you should be wanting for this sermon this morning, this the Sunday after Easter, with somewhat tongue-in-cheek I would suggest: "The Best Kept Secret In The Church." There's a text for it, of course. But before I give you the text let me provide some measure of a setting for the text. Try to visualize as best you can a congregation of Christians gathered centuries and centuries ago when the Church was very young. Let's be specific and say it's in Asia Minor in a city called Ephesus.

A man had come their way obsessed -- magnificently obsessed that Jesus Christ was alive in this world, and that His influence could be extended into the lives of people through people. He believed that with all his heart and with his soul. In fact, he had such a tremendous experience himself that all that he could do was, with every ounce of energy that he had, tell people that Jesus Christ is alive.

He went around from place to place . . oh, he earned his living by mending tents, but he lived to preach. Not only simply to preach, but to tell people they should band together as the Holy Spirit would bring them together. Preaching was never meant just to be an exercise. It was meant to get results. And one of the results was, as far as he was concerned, that congregations would be formed. And there was that band of people in Ephesus.

He was, I suppose I could suggest to you, like the man who founded this congregation -- a first-generation Milton J. Bieber -- who'd get a congregation started and then move on to another place. Any map of Asia Minor is dotted with the places where this man Paul had been. And after he'd been with them for a while he'd move on to some other place. But because he could do it as a kind of missionary-at-large, a pastor-at-large, he kept in touch with them. He'd write letters, he'd get reports about their spiritual condition. He just didn't allow himself to have a detached relationship. Now remember, he could do that because he was a missionary-at-large. He was not just the established parish pastor.

Now, when these Christians in Ephesus would gather, they'd remember him. And I'm about to suggest to you that once when they were gathered together there was a knock at

the door, and the person not only knocked at the door but barged right in, making bold to interrupt their worship experience and say, "Here it is --- it just came, I just got it! I can't wait to share it with you! You remember, he said he'd keep in touch with us -- you remember, he's been writing letters, and here's one that he wrote with our name on it -- To The Believers --To The Family in God -- To The Christians Who Live in Ephesus . . . that's who we are! I've read part of it already, I can't wait to tell you what he says to us! -- and particularly this part which he says was something that came to him while he was on his knees."

I don't have to tell you, do I, that pastors pray for their people? Paul was that kind of a pastor. And in this letter that he wrote he didn't get any farther than the 19th verse in what he had to tell them of what he was praying about.

Now quite incidentally, I'm going to stop at that point and share something with you for what it may be worth. There are people who stop me and say, "Pastor, I am praying for you" . . . and I myself have said to some of you, "You're in my prayers." What would happen if I said to you, "You're praying for me -- tell me, what are you praying for? I presume you're asking God to give me something -- what is it you're talking about when you talk about me with God?"

...and by the same token -- let's be fair play -- suppose you jolted me by surprise and said, "Pastor, what are you talking about when you talk to God about me, when you say I'm in your prayers?"

Good question, really. This is an awesome thing, to take the name of another before the Throne of Grace. Well, the Apostle Paul didn't hesitate. He wanted those Christians in Ephesus to know exactly what it was he was talking about when he was praying for them. And you know what it was? He was praying that those Christians in Ephesus would see things from God's point of view! He wasn't spending his time:

..."Dear God, keep them from an earthquake"

..."Dear God, keep them from famine"

...he wasn't listing all the physical afflictions that might come to them as you and I might think.

But the burden of his prayer was that no matter what happened, no matter with what they had to contend, they'd see it from God's point of view . . . well, let me read the text as I promised you, because no one has a right to stand at the sacred desk who doesn't root and ground what he's about to say to you in Scriptural truth. Here's the text, it's the first chapter of a letter that he wrote to Christians who lived in Ephesus, as already indicated, the 19th and 20th verses. It's a prayer, " . . that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ will give you spiritual wisdom, that you may realize how great is the hope of which He is calling you, the magnificence and splendor of the inheritance promised to Christians, and how tremendous is the power available to us

who believe in God. That power is the same divine energy which was demonstrated in Christ when He was raised from the dead."

...and I can well imagine the chap who read that letter to them when they heard it for the first time, being interrupted and not being able to go on to another verse without having somebody say, "I can't believe it! That's too good to be true -- you'd better read that to us again -- run it by us once more. What does Paul say to us?" And then the fellow would say, "Well there it is, I just read it to you. He's simply saying to us that when he prays for us, he wants us to have some measure of God's spiritual wisdom -- he wants us to be able to understand things from God's point of view."

" . . . and furthermore he wants us to know that the same energy that released Jesus Christ from the dead is available to us. We are not meant to be crippled by circumstances, we're not meant to succumb to defeat. We're meant to live as children of the day, and with hope. We are not meant to capitulate in the face of evil. This Jesus Christ -- sure, He suffered....sure, He died. We suffer -- we will die. But this Jesus Christ suffered and died triumphantly. God raised Him from the dead, He released a kind of divine energy so that death could not have dominion over him. And that same thing can be available to us, while we live. We can be fortified, we can be empowered!"

...no wonder

he was interrupted as he read those words"I can't believe it -- but it's possible! Paul says so." And he had a right to say so.

Now that's why I've come to this sacred desk this Sunday after Easter. We talk about the Good News which is Christmas.....

"Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy, for unto you is born this day in the city of David a savior which is Christ the Lord."

There is such a thing as the Good News of Easter, too. This one who was born grew up, and faced life and was able to cope, and survive. The echoes that come to us from the cross are the echoes of a man who died not as one being defeated -- but as one who was dying triumphantly.

Now there are any number of us who simply can't stand up to life. To the day I die I'll be indebted to the person that I love dearly who keeps saying to me, "One must learn to survive." Christians are survivors who stand up, and try to live another day -- not just somehow, but triumphantly. That's what Paul is saying when he writes to these Christians in Ephesus. "You don't have to be defeated. Life can defeat you, life defeats any number of people that I know. Life can give us that crippling blow. But says Paul, "You can be energized. That same energy that was made available to Jesus Christ can be made available to you!" But we say to ourselves, Christ is unique; we're

mortal. It isn't possible for us to be on the same level as He is. There's always the temptation then to settle and to say that it can't happen to us! But there are those, the great ones, who say that it can, and they allow us to believe that it did as we remember how they lived and how they died triumphantly.

That leads me to tell you about my friend Elwood Francis DeLong....as noble a person as God ever allowed Saint Luke Church to know. I mention his name and the faces of some of you brighten. He was an octogenarian when I first met him. For some, his life was over. But not so for Ellwood DeLong. He came to us 25 years ago. There was a time when he was young when he wanted to be a preacher. He may have spoken once before a group of people and he saw that he was ineffective because he had a faltering tongue. But he wanted to serve his Lord, and he said, "All right, if I can't speak for my Lord, then I will let my hands speak for my Lord if not my life." And he gave his whole life to designing the interior of churches. All that you see in front of you in the chancel, the altar, the reredos, the work above the altar, the gold leaf in the ceiling -- the entire Chapel of The Grateful Heart -- it was the last work that he did.

I went to see him in a nursing home when he was dying. Oh, we even knew when he came to us that cancer was taking its toll. He never admitted it, but there were all those blemishes on his face....and when I saw him in that nursing home as he was dying, his face was completely ulcerated, and blood was oozing from his eyes. He could not see me. He reached out for my hand, he recognized the voice. In the limited conversation that we had, so typical of him, he said, "Raymond, as I am dying (that was the intent of his words) . . . let me communicate to you who is going on living"- - what did he say? ... I once wrote it out formally - - "Don't just live somehow -- live triumphantly!"

....Don't allow yourself to be capitulated! That's what Paul's trying to tell these people. This is what is possible for Christians. Most of us don't spend enough energy believing it.

J. M. Barrie once had someone come to him who said, "Would you be kind enough to give me a title for this novel that I've written?" And he handed him the novel. Wit and clever one that J. M. Barrie was, he said, "I don't have to read your novel to give you a title. Let me ask you two questions, and as you answer those two questions I think I can give you a title for your work. My first question is, In this novel that you've written -- are there any drums?- - - that is, is this an up-beat kind of thing that you've done? "

...and the writer in all honesty had to say, "No, there are no drums in it."

Then said J. M. Barrie, "My second question is this: Are there any trumpets?"

...and the writer said, "Come to think of it, no trumpets."

"And there's the title for your work: "Without Drums And Without Trumpets"!

There are any number of Christians who live out the days of their years without drums, and without trumpets. Christians are meant to live out the days of their years with the drum-beat of God, to face another day with a steady and certain step, to go on living by the sound of the trumpets of God.

But some people can't. And they capitulate. Was it Dickens or Hawthorne who has it in "Great Expectations" -- how Miss Haversham, his character, her wedding day had arrived...the banquet table was spread, all set for the reception. She came down the stairs in her wedding gown, a half-hour from now the wedding was to be performed. But that half-hour before the wedding was to be performed a messenger comes from the groom and he says, "It's all off!"

...the novelist has Miss Haversham saying to her servants, "Stop the clock! Stop the clock!" And for her, life stopped at that moment. The food remained on the banquet table, it wasn't removed. Isn't it also written that she never took off her wedding gown? She stopped at this point, defeated.

Christians are not meant to be defeated. They're meant to go on even in the face of death. Ellwood DeLong, my debt to you is very great. You taught me not only how to live, but you've also taught me how to die -- not just somehow...but triumphantly. This I do believe.

* * *

(transcribed as recorded)

"TOUGH LOVE"

(I John 3: 1-2)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son
Jesus Christ, our Blessed Lord.
Amen.

What value you place upon sermon titles I'm not quite certain. Occasionally a preacher wrestles long, once he's dealt with the substance of his sermon, to choose the title that could be most appropriate. Let me suggest this title for the sermon that you are about to hear. It consists of only two words: "TOUGH LOVE" -- inspired of course by the text, a text which is a portion of Scripture which was the second Lesson read today, from one of three letters written by a man named John, an old man named John. The 3rd chapter of his first letter, verses 1 and 2, read in this manner, as J. B. Phillips has translated it for us:

" . . Consider the incredible love that the Father has shown us in allowing us to be called 'the children of God' --- and that is not just what we are called, but what we are. . . . Here and now we are God's children. . . ."

Without any hesitation let me tell you what I want to do. The next 15 - 18 minutes I want to talk to you about the most wonderful thing in the world: love. But there are many different kinds of love. That's why I am one profoundly grateful that when Jesus gave His new commandment, He went on to complete it as magnificently as He did, as He finished His sentence. He said, "A new command I give you, that you love one another." But He didn't stop at that point. He said, "A new command I give you, that you love one another, even as I love you."

People talk about love. But when some people talk about love they don't say the same thing or think the same thing that you and I may think. And when many people think about the subject of love, they may not always introduce the Christian ingredient, which is sacrificial element, the willful paying of a price without any thought of return whatsoever. I want to talk to you about what J. B. Phillips says is the incredible love of God -- a love that's extremely difficult for us to understand, it's so much more wonderful than any of us can ever imagine, or as J. B. Phillips says, even believe.

Let any two people discover that they respond toward each other as they do not respond to anyone else, and they know exactly that something wonderful is taking place

and they count themselves the most fortunate of all people. And that's precisely what this old man is saying to us: "God's love, it's wonderful, it's marvelous, it's incredible! -- and to think that it's happened to us, so much so that we can be called God's children! -- we can share it, we can reflect it."

Speaking of love, how many love stories do you know? Literature and legend are filled with them. Many of them are fact, some of them are fiction. But the theme of some of the most wonderful stories the world has ever heard, been told, have been written, are love stories. Will you listen for a minute as I recall for you a love story that I am sure the mother of Jesus must have told Him, and any devout Jew who lived at the time of Jesus, before or after -- the story of a man who felt himself called by God and wanted so much to do what God wanted him to do. And he fell in love. And for a while he thought he was happily married. And they had three children, he thought they were all his....

....I'm getting ahead of myself a bit. Later on undoubtedly there came a time when he wondered if they really were his, because he had to face the unfortunate fact, the tragic thing, that she was short-changing him -- she was not faithful. She had become an adulteress, and thoroughly enjoyed it. What do you suppose this man did?

-- did he turn to God, whose service he wanted to perform, and say, "God, I've had it! God, you can't deal with me this way! God! -- I deserve far better -- I deserve a woman who loves me -- faithfully, completely, fully, perfectly. This is what I've got, God? " . . . and later on he could say, "God, she's become a tramp -- she's just like a piece of merchandise. You pay the price, you take her! . . . "

She was a harlot. And according to the story that -- let's say for the moment, that the mother of Jesus may have told Him, or some rabbi, some teacher -- she had become so degraded that she was even sold on the market-place. And who do you suppose paid the price? Her husband! -- this man of God. He couldn't stand to think of it otherwise. And then he took her somewhere and hoped and prayed to God that in some sheltered spot she could be jolted into reality, she might know how much she was being loved by a pure love....and that in itself would make her a whole person.

It's not a story that I've made up. I have been talking about a man named Hosea. His wife's name was Gomer. I could even give you the names of their three children -- an incredible kind of love -- tough love.

Now, tough love, as some people understand it, is making someone stew...tough love, as some people understand it, is withdrawal, establishing a measure of detachment, let-

ting them out there all by themselves, not doing a single thing to help. That's not God's version of tough love. Tough love, from the Christian perspective, is love that lasts...endures...takes anything...and is willing to pay the ultimate price, and sacrificially so. That's tough love.

I've become teenager-annoyed at times when I think of the kind of thing that prevails in the minds of any number of people when in a very telling fashion, I presume, they indicate their understanding of it -- "We just fell in love." Well, anyone who falls in love always has the possibility of falling out of love. From the Christian perspective, no one falls in love. I'm of the old school who's willing to believe that God ordains...

....I'm willing to believe, properly from the Christian perspective, that marriages are made in Heaven -- properly understood -- and if you're willing to accept that, then that means that in the relationship that exists between two people the rule of Heaven is meant to prevail....

Well, we don't have enough of that kind of love here on earth. That's why this old man when he was talking about love -- God's kind of love -- he says it's incredible! .. you will find it hard to believe....you'll find it hard to understand -- it's that tough! ...it never gives up!

One of the grandest verses in the Old Testament is when Hosea, trying to apply on the basis of his own experience what he now understands is God's love for Israel, he refers to one of the tribes of Israel, Ephraem, or Ephraim....and when he says, "How can I give you up? How can I let you go?" . . . and then that magnificent expression:

"I am God. I am not man."

...and He loves with an everlasting kind of love.

There are three things to be said about this incredible love of God:

-- It's a love that sees.

I have no patience with people who say love is blind. True love is never blind. True love has eyes wide open. True love is that kind of love on the part of the person who sees the person for exactly what that person is and goes on caring and having a concern for that person just the same.

In Arthur Miller's "Death Of A Salesman" the errant one, you see, whose son has come to treat him with disgust and disdain, begin to rebuke their mother for the patience that she has for this errant husband. And all that she can do by way of response to her two sons, who can't understand why she is the way she is, -- she says what

I believe is the very echo of Heaven itself -- not that Arthur Miller may have intended it to be that -- she simply says, "But somebody has to pay attention to his kind." One of the grandest verses of all Scripture is: "While we were yet sinners God comes to us and reconciles us to himself." He doesn't wait for us to become good before He loves us, but in our weakness and in our infirmity, in our sinfulness, He loves us, in order that we might respond. This incredible love of God has eyes that see, sees us just as we are.

-- This incredible love of God is a love that not only sees, but seeks ... is constantly reaching out, making overtures.

Another grand and wonderful love story that appears in the Bible is the story that Jesus told about a man that had two sons. And one of them decided to go off, presumably to cut the ties. Did you ever stop to think how often that old man who stayed home and did his day's work as best he could, with whatever strength God gave him, night after night would scan the horizon and look and look and look.....if only he could leave home to go out to find him, but he had a job to do where he was.

-- This incredible love of God, a love that not only sees but seeks In the prophecy of Ezekiel it's said superbly:

"Behold, I, even I, will go to my people. I will seek them, I will save them . . . " and that's the third thing to be said about this incredible love of God: to love that seeks until it saves -- never forgets its objective....

The objective of love is always salvation, redemption, restoration, reconciliation -- that's the objective of love. . . . and always to meet the need that exists.

The object of love is not to condemn..."For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved."

There is so much that I want to tell you in the weeks that remain, so much I hope that you'll remember that I've already told you...when you talk about this incredible love of God.

Be patient with me when I tell you again what I once told you about my mentor in the faith, the man who nurtured me and encouraged me from my high school days on, who was one of my teachers at Nawakwa, who prayed for me, once the decision was made that I would become a pastor....who performed the marriage ceremony for Winifred and me... who baptized our two sons and named them for Jesus Christ....who was the first Good Friday preacher that I introduced to Saint Luke Church for the entire three hours -- Harvey Daniel Hoover, whose granddaughter was once a member of this parish.

I remember his telling us, one time when he was, as Dr. Stauderman is for us, an assisting pastor, and he was assisting -- and the pastor was no longer present. He was helping a congregation in Chicago. The church was located not far from a very disreputable section of the city. Somebody came and said, "Pastor, would you bury this woman?"....Not that Dr. Hoover asked, but they volunteered the information, as people will, -- "Pastor, she was a woman of the streets, she was a bad woman. But, Pastor, I can't think of her being buried without a preacher being present. Would you come?"

...and Dr. Hoover went. And as he went to the place from which she was to be buried, he found himself in this slum section of Chicago, the evidence of evil, no matter where he looked, evil in all of its ugliness. For the moment he was tempted to make the most of the opportunity to talk about the wrath of God... for the moment he was tempted to preach to them about hell, hellfire and damnation -- your sins will find you out! But by the grace of God he did not succumb to that temptation and by his own admission he says he went there, and braced himself, and said, How can I speak to them about hell? Hell -- they already know about it! They have been living in it.....

And he spoke to them about the outstretched arms of a Heavenly Father, who is always saying, "Come unto me, you belong to me. I have loved you with an everlasting love."

It's a parable for our day, it's a parable for all of us. Sure, our sins will find us out. Do we have to be told that? What some of us need to hear more than anything else is that we're being loved with an everlasting love.

There's an old Greek legend about the sculptor who fashioned for himself this beautiful form. And once he had done his work he sat there and he admired her and he loved her -- loved her so much that she became alive, and responded to his love. God is like that. Not that our hands create God, but God loves us so much, that given time, we have a way of responding, of allowing ourselves to be transformed -- by the only power in the world that can transform human nature -- the incredible love of God. This I most certainly believe.

* * * *

MAY the peace of God that passeth all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

(transcribed as recorded)